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by

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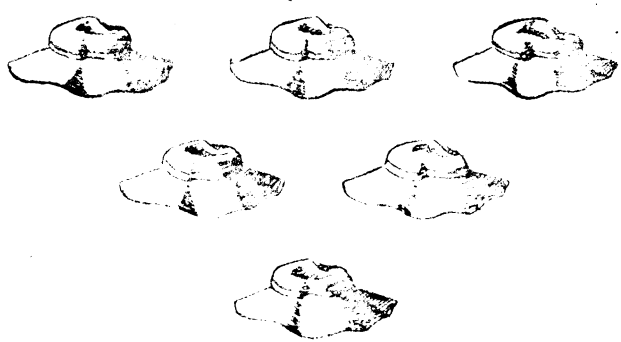
TOMMY WIDEAWAKE

TOMMY WIDEAWAKE

BY

H. H. BASHFORD



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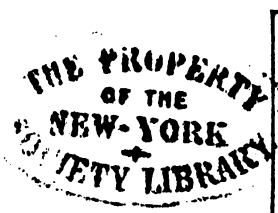

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Tommy Wideawake

I

IN WHICH FOUR MEN MAKE A PROMISE

We were sitting round the fire, in the study — five men, all of us middle-aged and sober-minded, four of us bachelors, one a widower.

And it was he who spoke, with an anxious light in his grey eyes, and two thoughtful wrinkles at the bridge of his military nose.

"Tommy," he observed, "Tommy is not an ordinary boy."

We were silent, and I could see the doctor's lips twitching beneath his moustache, as he gazed hard into the fire, and sucked at his cigar. The colonel knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and resumed:

"I suppose," he said, "that it is a comparatively unusual circumstance to find five men, unrelated by birth or marriage, who, having been friends at school and college and having reached years of maturity, find

themselves resident in the same village, with that early friendship not merely still existent, but, if I may say so, stronger than ever."

We nodded.

"It is unusual," observed the vicar.

"As you know," proceeded the colonel, a little laboriously, for he was a poor conversationalist, "the calls of my profession have forbidden me, of late years, to enjoy as much of your company as I could have wished — and now, after a very pleasant winter together, I must once again take the Eastern trail for an indefinite period."

We were regretfully silent — perhaps also a little curious, for our friend was not wont to discourse thus fully to us.

The poet appeared even a little dismayed, owing, doubtless, to that intuition which has made him so justly renowned in his circle of admirers, for the colonel's next remarks filled us all with a similar emotion.

"Dear friends," he said, leaning forward in

his chair, and placing his pipe upon the whist table, "may I — would you allow me so to trespass on this friendship of ours, as to ask for your interest in my only son, Thomas?"

For a minute all of us, I fancy, trod the fields of memory.

The poet's thoughts hovered round a small grave in his garden, wherein lay an erstwhile feline comrade of his solitude, whose soul had leaped into space at the assault of an unerring pebble.

The vicar and the doctor would seem to have had similar reminiscences — and had I not seen a youthful figure wading complacently through my cucumber frames? We all were interested in Tommy.

Another chord was touched.

"He is motherless, you see, and very alone," the colonel pleaded, as though our thoughts had been audible.

We remembered the brief bright years, and the long grey ones, and steeled our hearts for service.

"I have seen so little of him, myself," continued the colonel. "He is at school and he will go to college, but a boy needs more than school and college can give him — he needs a hand to guide his thoughts and fancies, and liberty, in which they may unfold. He needs developing in a way in which no school or college can develop him. I would have him see nature, and learn her lessons; see men and things, and know how to discern and appreciate. I would have him a little different — wider shall I say? — than the mere stereotyped public-school and varsity product — admirable as it is. I would have him cultured, but not a worshipper of culture, to the neglect of those deeper qualities without which culture is a mere husk.

"I would have him athletic, but not of those who deify athletics.

"Above all, I would have him such a gentleman as only he can be who realises that the privilege of good birth is in no way due to indigenous merit."

He paused, and for a while we smoked in silence.

"He will, of course, be away at school for the greater part of each year. But if you, dear friends, would undertake — in turn, if you will — to supervise his holidays, I should be more than grateful. We grown men regard our life in terms — a boy punctuates his, by holidays — and it is in them, that I would beg of you to influence him for good."

He turned to the poet,

"Tommy," he said, "has, I feel sure, a deeply imaginative nature, and I am by no means certain that he is not poetical. In fact, I believe he once wrote something about a star, which was really quite creditable — quite creditable."

The poet looked a little bewildered.

"And I believe that Tommy has scientific bents" — the colonel looked at the doctor, who bowed silently.

Then he regarded me a little doubtfully — after a pause,

"Tommy is not an ordinary boy," he re-

peated, somewhat ambiguously I thought. Lastly, he turned to the vicar, "I could never repay the man who taught my boy to love God," he said simply, and we fell once more to our silence, and our smoking, while the flames leaped merrily in the old grate, and flung strange shadows over the black wainscot and polished floor.

Camslove Grange was old and serene and aristocratic, an antithesis, in all respects, to its future owner, whose round head pressed a pillow upstairs, while his spirit wandered, at play, through a boy's dreamland. The colonel waved his hand.

"It will all be his, you see, one day," he said, almost apologetically, "and I want the old place to have a good master."

I have said that the colonel's request had filled us with dismay, and this indeed was very much the case.

We all had our habits. We all — even the doctor, who was the youngest of us by some years — loved peace and regularity. Moreover, we all, if not possessed of an

actual dislike for boys, nevertheless preferred them at a considerable distance.

And yet, in spite of all these things, we could not but fall in with the colonel's appeal, both for the sake of unbroken friendship — and in one case, at least (he will not mind, if I confess it), for the sake of a sweet lost face.

And so it came about that we clasped hands, in the silence of the old study, where, if rumour be true, more than one famous treaty has been made and signed, and took upon our shoulders the burden of Thomas, only son of our departing friend.

The colonel rose to his feet, and there was a glad light in his eyes. He held out both hands towards us.

"God bless you, old comrades," he said. Then, in answer to a question,

"Tommy returns to school, to-morrow, for the Easter term, and his holiday will be in April, I fancy. To whom is he to go first?"

We all looked at each other with questioning eyes — then we looked at the fire.

The silence began to get awkward.

"Shall we — er — shall we toss — draw lots, that is?" suggested the vicar, rather nervously.

The idea seemed good, and we resorted to the time-honoured, yet most unsatisfactory, expedient of spinning a penny in the air.

The results, combined with a process of exclusion, left the choice between the poet and the doctor.

The vicar spun, and the poet called. "Heads!" he cried, feverishly.

And heads it was.

A smile of relief and triumph was dawning on the doctor's face, when the poet looked at him, anxiously.

"Is there not—" he asked. "Is there not a method of procedure, by which one may call thrice?"

"Threes," remarked the vicar, genially.

"Of course there is — would you like me to toss again?"

"I — I think I would," said the poet,

meekly. Then turning, apologetically, to the colonel,

"It's better to make *quite* sure, don't you think?"

The doctor looked a little crestfallen, but agreed, and the vicar once more sent the coin into the air.

"Tails," cried the poet, and as the coin fell, the sovereign's head lay upward.

The poet drew a deep breath.

"It would seem," he said, bowing to the doctor, "that Tommy may yet become your guest."

"There is another go," said the doctor, and the vicar tossed a third time.

"Heads," cried the poet, and heads it proved to be.

The poet wiped his forehead, after which the colonel grasped his hand.

"Write and tell me how he gets on," he said. "I cannot tell you how grateful I am to you — to all of you."

"No, of course not — that is, it's nothing you know — only too delighted to have the

dear boy," stammered the poet. "Er — does he — can he undress himself and — and all that, you know?"

The colonel laughed.

"Why, he's thirteen," he cried.

A little later we took our departure.

In a shadowy part of the drive the poet pulled my sleeve.

"Can boys of that age undress themselves and brush their own teeth, do you suppose?" he asked.

"I believe so," I answered.

The poet shook his head sorrowfully.

"I don't know what Mrs. Chundle will say," he remarked.

And at the end of the drive we parted, with averted looks and scarce concealed distress, each taking a contemplative path to the hitherto calm of his bachelor shrine.

II

IN WHICH TWO RATS MEET A SUDDEN DEATH

"THE country is just now at its freshest," said the poet, waving his hand towards the open window and the green lawn. "The world is waking again to its — er, spring holiday, Tommy, and you must be out in the air and the open fields, and share it while you may."

The poet beamed, a little apprehensively it is true, across the breakfast table at Tommy, who was mastering a large plate of eggs and bacon with courage and facility.

"It's jolly good of you to have me, you know," observed Tommy, pausing a moment to regard his host.

"On the contrary, it is my very glad privilege. I have often felt that my youth has been left behind a little oversoon — I am getting, I fancy, a trifle stiff and narrowed. You must lead me, Tommy, into the world of action and sport — we will play games together — hide and go seek. You must buy

me a hoop, and we will play marbles and cricket —" and the poet smiled complacently over his spectacles.

Tommy wriggled a little uneasily in his chair, and looked out of the window.

The trees were bending to the morning wind, which sang through the budding branches and hovered over the garden daffodils. Away beyond the lawn and the meadows the hills rose clear and bracing to the eye, and through a chain of willows sped the wavering blue gleam of sunny waters.

"I — I'm an awful duffer at games," said Tommy, with a blush on his brown cheeks, and horrid visions of the poet and himself bowling hoops.

The poet drew a deep breath of relief.

"You love nature, dear boy — the sights and sounds and mysteries of the hedgerow and the stream — is it not so?"

"Yes," said Tommy, dubiously. "I — I 'm rather a hot shot with a catapult."

The poet gazed out across the garden. A

small green mound beneath the chestnut tree marked the grave of the fond Delicia — a tribute to Tommy's skill.

Involuntarily, the poet sighed.

Tommy looked up from the marmalade.

"You don't mind, do you?" he asked anxiously.

"No, no, of course not, dear boy," said the poet with an effort. "That is — you — you won't hit anything, will you?"

"Rather," cried Tommy. "You jolly well see if I don't."

Delicia's successor looked up from her saucer on the rug, and the "Morning Post" slipped from the poet's nerveless grasp.

"You — oh Tommy, you will spare the tabby," he gasped tragically, indicating the rug and its occupant.

Tommy grinned.

"All right," he said,— adding as a comforting afterthought, "And cats are awful poor sport, you know — they 're so jolly slow."

But the poet was far away.

With every meal Mrs. Chundle brought a pencil and paper, for as likely as not inspiration would not scorn to come with coffee or hover over a rasher of bacon. And it was even so, at this present.

Tommy watched the process with some curiosity. Then he stole to the window, for all the world was calling him.

But he paused with one foot on the first step, as the poet looked up from his manuscript.

"How do you like this?" he asked eagerly:

Oh the daffodils sing of my lady's gown,
The hyacinths dream of her eyes,
And the wandering breezes across the down,
The harmonies dropt from the skies,
Are full of the song of the love that swept
My citadel by surprise.

Oh the woods they are bright with my lady's voice,
The paths they are sweet with her tread,
And the kiss of her gown makes the lawn rejoice,
The violet lift her head.
Yet, lady, I know not if I must smile
Or weep for the days long sped.

The poet blinked rapturously through his glasses at Tommy, listening respectfully, by the window.

"They 're jolly good — but I say, who is she?"

The poet seemed a little puzzled.

"I am afraid I do not comprehend you," he said.

"The lady," observed Tommy. "I did n't know you were in love, you know, or anything of that sort."

The poet rose to his feet, with some dignity.

"I am not in love, Thomas," he said. "I — I never even think about such things." Tommy turned back.

"I say, if you 're going to the post-office with that will you buy me some elastic — for my catty, you know?" he said.

Just then the housekeeper entered, and Tommy went out upon the lawn.

"Please, sir, there 's a friend o' Mister Thomas's a settin' in the kitchen, an' 'e 's bin there a hower, pretty nigh — an' 'is talk

— it fairly makes me blood rise, and me pore stomach that sour — an', please, 'e wants ter know if Mister Thomas is ready to go after them rats 'e was talkin' of, an' if the Cholmondeleys, which is me blood relations, 'ad 'eard 'im — Lord."

Mrs. Chundle wiped her brow at this appalling supposition, and the poet gazed helplessly at her.

"Did you say a friend of Mr. Thomas's?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, an' that common 'e — 'e 's almost took the shine off of the plates."

"Dear, dear! how very — very peculiar, Mrs. Chundle."

A genial, red countenance appeared at the doorway.

"Beg pawdon, sir, but the young gemman 'e wanted me to show 'im a nest or two o' rats down Becklington stream, sir — rare fat uns they be, sir, too."

"I — I do not approve of sport — of slaying innocent beings — even if they be but rodents; I must ask you to leave me."

The poet waved his hand.

The rubicund sportsman looked disappointed. "Beg pawdon, sir, I 'm sure. Thought 's 'ow it were all right, sir."

"I do not blame you, my good man. I merely protest against the ruling spirit of destruction which our country worships so deplorably. You may go."

And all this while Tommy stood bareheaded on the lawn, filling his lungs with the morning's sweetness, and feeling the grip of its appeal in his heart and blood and limbs. A sturdy little figure he was, clad in a short jacket and attenuated flannel knickerbockers which left his brown knees bare above his stockings.

The blood in his round cheeks shone red beneath the tan, and there were some freckles at the bridge of his nose. In his hand was a battered wide-awake hat — his usual headgear — and the origin of his sobriquet — for he will, I imagine, be known as Tommy Wideawake until the crack of doom, and, maybe, even after that.

With all his appreciation of the day, however, no word of the conversation just recorded missed his ears, and I regret to say that when the red-cheeked intruder turned a moment at the garden gate, Tommy's right eyelashes trembled a moment upon his cheek while his lips parted over some white teeth for the smallest fraction of a second.

Then he kicked viciously at a daisy and blinked up at the friendly sun.

The poet stepped out on the lawn beside him with a worried wrinkle on his forehead.

"I feel rather upset," he said.

"Let 's go for a walk," suggested Tommy.

The poet considered a moment.

An epic, which lagged somewhat, held out spectral arms to him from the recesses of his writing-desk, but the birds' spring songs were too winsome for prolonged resistance, and to their wooing the poet capitulated.

"Let us come," he said, and they stepped through the wicker gate into the water-meadows.

The Becklington brook is only a thin

thread here, but lower down it receives tributaries from two adjoining valleys and becomes a stream of some importance, turning, indeed, a couple of mills, before it reaches the Arrowley, which enters the Isis.

The day was hot — one of those early heralds of June so often encountered in late April, and the meadows basked dreamily in the sun, while from the hills came a dull glow of budding gorse.

The poet was full of fancies, and as the house grew farther behind them, and the path led ever more deeply among copse and field, his natural calm soon reasserted itself. From time to time he would jot down a happy phrase or quaint expression, enlarging thereon to Tommy, who listened patiently enough.

Plop.

A lazy ripple cut the surface of the stream, and another, and another.

Tommy lifted a warning hand and held his breath.

Yes, sure enough, there was a brown nose stemming the water.

In an instant Tommy was crouching in the reeds, his hand feeling in his pocket, and his small body quivering.

The poet's mouth was open.

Followed a twang, and the whistle of a small projectile, and the rat disappeared. But the stone had not hit him.

"Tommy!" protested the poet.

But his appeal fell on deaf ears, for Tommy was watching the far side of the stream with an anxious gaze. Suddenly the brown nose reappeared.

He was a very ugly rat.

"Tommy!" said the poet again, weakly.

The rat was making for a bit of crumbled bank opposite, and Tommy stood up for better aim. The poet held his breath.

One foot more and the prey would be lost, but Tommy stood like a young statue — then whang; and slowly the rat turned over on his back and vanished from sight, to float presently — a swollen corpse — down the quiet stream.

"Well hit, sir," cried the poet.

Tommy turned with dancing eyes.

"Jolly nearly lost him," he said. "You should just see young Collins with a catty. He's miles better than me."

But the poet had remembered himself.

"Tommy," he said, huskily, "I—I don't approve of sport of this kind. Cannot you aim at — at inanimate objects?"

"It 's a jolly poor game," said Tommy — then holding out the wooden fork, with its pendant elastic.

"Have a try," he said.

The poet accepted a handful of ammunition.

"I must amuse the boy and enter into his sports as far as I may if I would influence his character," he said to himself.

Tommy stuck a clod of earth on a stick some few yards away, at which, for some time, the poet shot wildly enough.

Yet, with each successive attempt, the desire for success grew stronger within him, and when at last the clod flew into a thousand

crumbs, he flushed with triumph, and had to wipe the dimness from his glasses.

Oh, poets! it is dangerous to play with fire.

Plop.

And another lusty rat held bravely out into the stream.

"Oh, get him, get him!" cried Tommy, jumping up and down. "Lend me the catty. Let me have a shot. Do buck up."

But the poet waved him aside.

"There shall be no—" he hesitated.

This rat was surely uglier than the last.

"No unseemly haste," concluded the poet.

Did the rat scent danger? I know not, but, on a sudden, he turned back to shelter. And, alas, this was too much for even Principle and Conscience—and whang went the catapult, and lo, even as by a miracle (which, indeed, it surely was), the bullet found its mark.

And I regret to say that the vicar, leaning

unnoticed on a neighbouring gate, heard the poet exclaim, with some exultation: "Got him."

"Oh, *well* hit!" cried Tommy. "By Jove, that was a ripping shot."

The poet blushed at the praise — but alas for human pleasures, and notably stolen ones, for they are fleeting.

"Hullo," said a sonorous voice.

They both turned, and the vicar smiled.

The poet was hatless and flushed. From one hand dangled a catapult; in the other he clutched some convenient pebbles.

"Really," said the vicar, "I should never have thought it."

The poet sighed, and handed the weapon to Tommy.

"Run away now, old chap," he said, "and have a good time. I think I shall go home."

Tommy trotted off into the wood, and the vicar and the poet held back towards the village.

"How goes the experiment?" asked the

former, magnanimously ignoring the scene he had just witnessed.

The poet shook his head.

"It is hard to say yet," he replied. "I have not seen any *marked* development of the poetical and imaginative side of him — and he brings some very queer friends to my house. But he 's a good boy, on the whole, and the holidays have only just begun."

In the village street they paused.

"I — I want to go to the post-office," said the poet.

"All right," said the vicar.

"Don't — please don't wait for me," said the poet.

"It 's a pleasure," replied the vicar. "The day is fine and young, and it is also Monday. I am not busy."

"I really wish you would n't."

The vicar was a man of tact, and had known the poet since boyhood, so he bowed.

"Good day," he said, and strolled towards the parsonage.

The poet looked up and down the long, lazy street. There was no one in sight. Then he plunged into the little shop.

"Some elastic, please," he said, nervously. "Thick and square — for a catapult."

III

IN WHICH A HAT FLOATS DOWN STREAM

"AND so my boy has taken up his abode with our friend, the poet," wrote the colonel to me. "Do you know, I fancy it will be good for both of them. I have long felt that our poet was getting too solitary and remote — too self-centred, shall I say?

"And yet I have, too, some misgivings as to his power of controlling Tommy — although my faith in Mrs. Chundle is profound.

"Tommy, as you know, is not perhaps quite so strong as he might be, and needs careful watching — changing clothes and so on. You recollect his sudden and quite severe illness just after the Chantrey's garden party last year."

I laid down the letter and smiled, for I had wondered at the time at Tommy's survival, so appalling had been his powers of absorption.

"Poor colonel," I reflected. "He is too

ridiculously wrapped up in the young rascal, for anything."

The letter ran on:

"Spare no expense as to his keep and the supplying of his reasonable wishes, but do not let him know, at any rate for the present, that he is heir to Camslove — I think he does not realise it yet — and for a while it is better he should not.

"My greeting to all the brothers. There are wars and rumours of wars in the air of the Northwest. . . . . ."

I restored the letter to my pocket, and lay back in the grass, beneath the branches.

Wars and rumours of wars — well, they were far enough from here, as every twittering birdling manifested.

The colonel had always been the man of action among us, though he, of us all, had the wherewithal to be the most at ease.

One of those strange incongruities with which life abounds, and which, I reflected, must be accepted with resignation.

I had always rather prided myself upon

the completeness with which I had resigned myself to my lot of idleness and obscurity, and to my own mind was a philosopher of no small merit.

I lay back under the trees full of the content of the day and the green woods and abandoned myself to meditation.

Whether it was the spirit of Spring or some latent essence of activity in my being, I do not know, but certain it is that a wave of discontent spread over me — a weariness (very unfamiliar) of myself and my cheap philosophy.

I sat up, wondering at the change and its suddenness, groping in my mind for a solution to the problem.

Could it be that my rule of life was based on a fallacy?

Surely not. Suddenly I thought of Tommy and took a deep breath of the sweet woodland air, for I had found what I had wanted.

Resignation — it was a sacrilege to use the word on such a day.

Yes, I thought, there is no doubt that the instinctive philosophy of boyhood is the true rule of life, as indeed one ought to have suspected long ago.

To enjoy the present with all the capacity of every sense, to regard the past with comparative indifference, since it is irrevocable, and the future with a healthy abandonment, since it is unknown, and to leave the sorrows of introspection to those who know no better — avaunt with your resignation. And even as I said it I saw the reeds by the pool quiver and a pair of brown eyes twinkle joyously at me from their midst.

"Hello, Tommy!" I cried.

He emerged, clad only in an inconspicuous triangular garment about his waist.

"I 've been watching you ever so long," he said triumphantly.

"Been bathing?" I asked.

"Rather. It's jolly fine and not a bit cold. I say, you should have seen the old boy potting rats."

"The poet?" I murmured in amaze.

Tommy nodded.

"He is getting quite a good shot," he said. "He was doing awful well till the vicar saw him about an hour ago — an' then he would n't go on any more."

"I should think not," said I. "The humanitarian, the naturalist, the anti-vivisectionist, the anti-destructionist — it passes comprehension."

Tommy took a header and came up on to the sunny bank beside me, where he stood a moment with glowing cheeks and lithe shining limbs.

"This is ripping," he said — every letter an italic. "This is just ab-solutely ripping."

I laughed at his enthusiasm, and, as I laughed, shared it — oh the wine of it, of youth and health and spring — was I talking about resignation just now? — surely not.

Tommy squatted down beside me on his bare haunches, with his hands clasped over his knees.

"I have heard from your father to-day," I said.

Tommy grunted, and threw a stick at an early butterfly.

He was always most uncommunicative where he felt most, so I waited with discretion.

"All right?" he queried, presently, in a nonchalant voice.

I nodded.

"He says he's afraid you're not very strong."

Tommy stared, then he looked a little frightened.

"I — of course I'm not *very* strong, you know," he said thoughtfully, casting a glance down his sturdy young arms. "But I can lick young Collins, an' he weighs seven pounds more than me, an' I can pull up on the bar at gym —"

I hastened to reassure him.

"He referred to your attack last summer, you know, after the Chantrey affair."

Tommy grinned expansively.

"I expect the pater didn't know what it was," he said.

"But I did."

"You — you never told him?" in an anxious voice.

"No."

Tommy sighed.

"The pater does hate a chap being greedy, you see, and — those strawbobs were so awfully good. I could n't help it — an' father thought I 'd got a — intestinal chill, I think he said."

Tommy gave a passing moment to remembrance. Then he jumped up.

"I 'm quite dry again," he said, looking down at me. "So I guess I 'll hop in."

The remark appeared to me slightly inconsequent, but Tommy laughed and drew back under the shade of the tree. Then came a rush of white limbs, and he was bobbing up again in the middle of the sunny pool.

"Well dived," I cried, encouragingly, but he looked a little contemptuous.

"It was a jolly bad one," he said, "a beastly. . . ". Delicacy forbids me to record

the exact word he used, but it ended with "flopper."

He crawled out again, and shook the water from his eyes.

"I say, won't you come in?" he cried eagerly. "It's simply grand in there, and a gravel bottom."

But I am a man of careful habits, and sober ways, with a reputation for some stateliness both of behaviour and bearing, and I shook my head.

Tommy urged again.

"It's not as if you were an old man," he cried.

The thought had not occurred to me. Age, in our little fraternity had been a matter of but small interest. We had pursued the same routine of gentle exercise, and dignified diversion, quiet jest and cultured occupation, for so many years now, that we had seemed to be alike removed from youth and age, in a quiet, unalterable, back-water of life, quite apart from the hurrying stream of contemporary event.

No, I was certainly not an old man, unless a well preserved specimen of forty-eight, with simple habits, can so be styled.

Tommy stood expectant before me, his bare feet well apart, a very embodiment of young health, and, as I looked at him, a horrid doubt crept into my mind — had I — could I possibly have become that most objectionable of persons, a man in a groove?

"Do come," said Tommy.

"Don't be a fool," said Wisdom (only I was not quite sure of the speaker).

I looked round at the meadow, and the wood, and saw that we were alone.

"It is April," I said weakly.

"But it 's quite warm — it is really." And so I fell.

To you, O reader, it may seem a quite small matter, but to me it was far from being so, for as I climbed the bank from each glad plunge I felt in my blood a strange desire growing to do something, to achieve, to surmount.

Such emotions I had not known for years

— not since — a time, when, on a day, I had set myself to love seclusion and inactivity, and to live in study and retrospect, on the small means that were mine.

Ah, Tommy, never think that if any one desire be unfulfilled, life has therefore lost its sweetness, and its mission, and its responsibility!

"Cave," hissed Tommy, from the water.

I held my breath, and sure enough there were voices along the path, and close at hand, too.

I made a desperate leap, and entered the water with a quite colossal flop, for I am moderately stout.

And, even so, I had barely time to wade in up to my neck, before two figures, those of a little girl and a young lady, tripped into sight.

"Why," said the little girl, "there 's old Mr. Mathews and a little boy in the pool. How funny."

The young lady — it was Lady Chantrey's governess — hesitated a moment and then courageously held on.

"Yes," I heard her say. "It certainly is peculiar, quite peculiar."

Whether she referred to me, or the situation, or an affair of previous conversation, I did not know.

I did not, indeed, much care, for surely this was enough that I, a philosopher of dignity, a bachelor of some importance, at any rate in Camslove, should have been seen in a small pool, with only a draggled head above the surface, by Lady Chantrey's daughter, and her governess.

I crept out, and had perforce to sit in the sun to dry, praying earnestly lest any other members of the surrounding families should come that way.

Tommy was in high spirits.

"It 's done you lots of good," he said.

I glared at him.

"What do you mean?" I asked coldly, for his words seemed suggestive.

"You look so jolly fresh," he observed, dressing himself leisurely.

I felt that it was time I returned, and in-

vited Tommy to partake of lunch with me. He declined, however, as he had thoughtfully provided himself with food, before starting out with the poet.

"So long," he said.

As I glanced up the brook, before returning homewards, I saw a sailor hat, navigating a small rapid.

"But I have no walking-stick," I reflected. "And it is in the middle of the stream."

IV

IN WHICH A YOUNG LADY IS LEFT UPON THE BANK

THE sailor hat bobbed, merrily, down the stream, scorning each friendly brown boulder that would have stopped it, and dodging every drooping bough that would have held it back. For was not its legend of H. M. S. Daring, and must not the honour of Britain's navy be manfully maintained?

Tommy sat peacefully just above the bathing pool, munching his sandwiches, and letting the clear water trickle across his toes, very much contented with himself, and, consequently, with his environment also.

"Oh please — my hat," said a pathetic voice.

Tommy turned round, and on the path behind him stood the little girl, who had passed, a short while before.

She was quite breathless, and her hair was very tangled, as it crept about her cheeks, and hung over her brow.

Her hands were clasped, and she looked at Tommy, appealingly.

Tommy surveyed the hat, which had swung into the pool.

"It's too deep, just there, for me to go in, with my clothes on," he said.

"But there's a shallow part a little way down, and I'll go for it there. Come on."

He jumped up, and crammed his stockings and shoes into his pockets, as they ran down the path, beside the brook.

"How did you lose it?" he asked.

"I was climbing a tree — and — and the wind blowed it off."

"Oh!"

"My governess is reading a book, about half a mile up the stream, where the poplars are."

"Oh!"

Tommy felt strangely tongue-tied — a new and wholly perplexing experience. He was relieved when they arrived at the shallows, and waded carefully into the stream.

As the hat sailed down, he dexterously caught it, and came back in triumph.

"Oh, thank you so much. I hope you are 'nt very wet."

Tommy examined the upturned edge of his knickerbockers, and then looked into a pair of wide black eyes.

"Not a bit, hardly," he said, and he thought her cheeks were redder than any he had seen. He did not, as a rule, approve of girls, but he felt that there was a kindred spirit twinkling behind those black eyes.

"I think I must go back," said she.

"Wh — what is your name?" stammered Tommy, with a curious desire to prolong the time.

She laughed.

"I think you might tell me yours."

"I got your hat for you."

"You liked getting it."

"You 'd have lost it, if I had n't gone in."

"No, I should n't. I could have got it myself. I 'm not afraid."

Tommy capitulated.

"They call me Tommy Wideawake," he said.

"What a funny name. I thought you looked rather sleepy, when I saw you on the bank just now."

"You looked jolly untidy," retorted Tommy irrelevantly.

"Are you the browny whitey colonel's son?"

Tommy spoke with aroused dignity.

"You must not call my father names," he said.

"I 'm not. I think he 's a splendid brave man, and I always call him that, because his face is so brown and his moustache and hair so very white."

Tommy blushed. Then he said very slowly, and with some hesitation, for to no one before had he confided so much:

"I think he is the bravest — the bravest officer in the whole army."

Then his eyes fell, and he looked confusedly at his toes.

The stream was rippling softly over the shallows, full of its young dream.

Then —

"I 'm Madge Chantrey," said a shy voice.

Tommy looked up eagerly.

"Why, then I must have seen you in church — but you looked so different you know, so jolly — jolly different."

Madge laughed.

"I 've often seen you, in an eton jacket, with a very big collar, and you always went to sleep in the sermon, and forgot to get up when the vicar said 'And now.'"

Tommy grinned.

Then an inspiration seized him.

"I say; let 's go on to the mill, an' we 'll pot water-rats on the way, an' get some tea there. He 's an awful good sort, is the miller. His name 's Berrill, and he 's ridden to London and back in a day, and it 's a hundred and fifty miles, and he can carry two bags of wheat at once, and there 's sure to be some rats up at Becklington End, and

it 's only about three o'clock — and it 's such an absolutely ripping day."

He stopped and pulled up some grass.

"You might as well," he concluded, in a voice which implied that her choice was of no consequence to him.

Her black eyes danced, and she swung her hat thoughtfully round her finger.

"It would be rather nice," she said. "But there is Miss Gerald, you know; she will wonder where I am."

"Never mind. I 'll bring you home."

And down the chain of water-meadows from one valley to another they wandered through the April afternoon, till the old mill-pool lay before them deep and shadowy beneath the green, wet walls. A long gleam of light lay athwart its surface, dying slowly as the sunset faded.

"It is tea-time," said Tommy.

"Poor Miss Gerald," murmured Madge.

"She 's all right," replied Tommy, cheerfully. "I expect she 's jolly well enjoying herself."

As I passed the poet's gate I saw him pacing the lawn, and hailed him.

"Have you enjoyed the morning?" I asked.

He looked at me a little suspiciously.

"You have n't seen the vicar?" he queried.

I shook my head.

"Yes," he observed. "Thomas and I have been bathed, I may say, in nature."

He waved his hand.

"I saw Tommy bathing," said I.

Again the poet looked at me sharply.

"Did you — did you have any converse with the boy?" he asked.

"Only a little. He seemed to be thoroughly happy."

The poet smiled.

"Ah! the message of Spring is hope, and happiness, and life," he said, "and Tommy is even now in Spring."

I bowed.

"I saw a dead rat floating down stream," I remarked, casually.

The poet gave me a dark glance, but my expression was innocent and frank.

"*In media vitae, sumus in morte,*" he observed, sententiously, and walked back to the lawn.

As I turned away, I met the doctor hurrying home.

He greeted me pleasantly, but there was curiosity in his eyes.

"What 's the matter?" I asked, genially, for I felt I had scored one against the poet.

"Whatever has happened to your hair? It looks very clammy and streaky — and it 's hanging over your ears."

I crammed my hat on a little tighter.

"Nothing at all," I said, hurriedly. "It 's — it 's rather warm work, you know, walking in this weather."

But I could see he did n't believe me.

"Seen Tommy?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Been fooling up the stream, I suppose?"

I coloured.

"No, of course not — er, that is, yes — Tommy has."

The doctor smiled.

"Good day, Mathews," he said.

And we parted.

Miss Gerald sat reading, on the bank.

V

IN WHICH APRIL IS MISTRESS

I have heard the song that the Spring-time sings
  In my journey over the hills,
The wild *reveille* of life, that rings
  To the broad sky over the hills:
For the banners of Spring to the winds are spread,
  Her hosts on the plain overrun,
And the front is led, where the earth gleams red,
  And the furze-bush flares to the sun.

I have seen the challenge of Spring-time flung
  To the wide world over the hills;
I have marched its resolute ranks among,
  In my journey over the hills.
The strong young grass has carried the crest,
  And taken the vale by surprise,
As it leapt from rest on the Winter's breast
  To its conquest under the skies.

I have heard the secret of Spring-time told
  In a whisper over the hills,
That life and love shall arise and hold
  Dominion over the hills
Till the Summer, at length, shall awake from sleep,
  Warm-cheeked, on the wings of the day,

TOMMY WIDEAWAKE

Where the still streams creep, and the lanes lie deep,
And the green boughs shadow the way.

"Four o'clock!" sang the church bells down the valley, as the poet stooped to cull an early blue-bell.

"Daring little blossom — why, your comrades are still sleeping," he said.

The blue-bell was silent, but all the tiny green leaves laughed, blowing cheekily in the sun.

"Poor, silly poet," they seemed to say, "why not wake up, like the blue-bell, from your land of dreams, and drink the real nectar — live for a day or two in a real, wild, glorious Spring?"

But the poet dreamed on, stringing his conceits heavily together, and with a knitted brow; for, somehow, the feet of the muse lagged tardily this April afternoon.

Then he stumbled over a parasol which lay across the path.

He looked up.

"I beg your pardon," he said, looking into a pair of blue eyes — or were they grey, or hazel? He was not quite sure, but they seemed, at any rate, Hibernian.

"It was quite my fault; I am so sorry."

"Nay, I was dreaming," said the poet.

"And, sure, so was I, too."

"I have not hurt it, I trust."

"Not at all, but it must be quite late."

"It is four o'clock."

"Good gracious, where can the child have got to?"

"You have lost some one?"

"My pupil."

The poet bowed.

"A sorrow that befalls all leaders of disciples," he observed.

Miss Gerald stared, and the poet continued, "The young will only learn when they have fledged their wings and found them weak."

"And then?"

"They come to us older ones for a remedy. Knowledge is associated, madam, with broken wings."

"But I cannot take philosophy home to her mother — she will most certainly require Madge — and can you tell me where this path leads?"

The poet waved his hand.

"Up-stream to the village — down-stream to the mill," he said.

Miss Gerald thought a moment.

"She will have gone down stream," she exclaimed.

The poet meditated.

"I, too, have lost a boy," he said.

Miss Gerald looked surprised.

"The son of a friend," explained the poet.

"I must look for Madge at once," cried Miss Gerald, gathering up her books.

"May we search together — you know the proverb about the heads?"

She laughed.

"If you like," she said, and they followed the stream together.

"You are the poet, are you not?" asked Miss Gerald presently.

"A mere amateur."

"Lady Chantrey has a copy of your works. I have read some of them."

"I trust they gave you pleasure — at any rate amusement."

"A little of both," said Miss Gerald.

"You are very frank."

"Some of them puzzled me a little — and — and I think you belie your writings."

"For instance?"

"You sing of action, and Spring, and achievement — and love. But you live in dreams, and books, and solitude."

"I believe what I write, nevertheless."

Miss Gerald was silent, and in a minute the poet spoke again,

"You think my writings lack the ring of conviction?" he asked.

She laughed.

"They would be stronger if they bore the ring of experience," she said. "*Experientia docet*, you know, and the poets are supposed to teach us ordinary beings."

"I don't pretend to teach."

"Then you ought to. Is it not the duty of 'us older ones,' as you said just now?—The old leaves living over again in the new, you know," and she smiled. "That's quite poetical, is n't it, even if it is a bit of a platitude?"

"And be laughed at for our pains, even as those hopeful young debutantes are laughing at the dowdy old leaves, on that dead tree yonder."

"I knew you were no true singer of Spring."

Two children wandered back along the path.

"I say, you're not a bad sort," said Tommy.

Madge laughed.

"Hullo, Tommy," cried the poet.

"My dear Madge, where *have* you been?" cried Miss Gerald.

The poet smiled.

"It is April, Miss Gerald," he said. "We must not be too severe on the young people. As you know, this is proverbially

an irresponsible, changeable, witch of a month."

"We must hurry home, Madge," said Miss Gerald, holding out a graceful, though strong, hand to the poet.

He clasped it a moment.

"That was an interesting chat we had, Miss Gerald. I shall remember it. Come, Tommy, it is time that we also returned."

They walked slowly home together, Tommy chattering away freely of the day's adventures. The poet seemed more than usually abstracted. In a pause of Tommy's babbling, the name on the fly leaf of a book came back to him. He had seen it, in the sunshine, by the stream.

"Mollie Gerald," he murmured.

"I beg your pardon," said Tommy, politely.

"Nothing," snapped the poet.

"Which I says to Berrill, 'Berrill,' I says, 'Jest look 'ee 'ere now, if the pote ain't a-walkin' along o' Miss Gerald from the

'all, as close an' hinterested as never was, an' 'im, fer all the world, a 'missusogynist,' I says, meanin' a wimming-'ater.

"An' Berrill 'e said 'imself as 'e'd 'ardly' a believed it if 'e 'ad n't seed it wi' 'is own heyes, so to speak.

"'It do be a masterpiece,' 'e said, 'a reg'lar masterpiece it be.'"

They were sitting in Mrs. Chundle's kitchen, and Mrs. Berrill seemed excited.

Mrs. Chundle wiped a moist forehead with her apron, and shook her head.

"What with Mister Thomas, an' catapults — I could believe hanythink, Mrs. Berrill," she said.

"The pote's changin' 'is ways, Mrs. Chundle."

"'E is that, Mrs. Berrill, which as me haunt Jane Chundle, as is related to me blood-relations, the Cholmondeleys, 'eard Mrs. Cholmondeley o' Barnardley say to the rector's wife, an' arterwards told me private, 'Yer never do know oo's oo nowadays' — be they poits or hanybody else."

"It bees just what the parson wer a sayin' a fortnight Sunday, wars an' rumours o' wars, an' bloody moons, an' disasters an' catapults, in the last days, 'e says — they be hall signs o' the times, Mrs. Chundle."

Mrs. Chundle sipped her tea, and looked round her immaculate kitchen. Then she lowered her voice,

"I 'm 'opin', Mrs. Berrill, I 'm 'opin' hearnest as 'ow when Mister Thomas goes back, the master will come to 'imself, like the prodigale."

Mrs. Berrill looked doubtful.

"When once the worm hentereth Eden, Mrs. Chundle," she began, enigmatically — and they both shook their heads.

"The worm bein' Mister Thomas," remarked Mrs. Chundle. "An' 'im that vilent an' himpetuous I never does know what 'e 's agoin' hafter next."

"You should be firm, Mrs. Chundle."

"Which I ham, Mrs. Berrill, by nature hand intention, an' if I 'ad me own way I 'd

spank 'im 'earty twice a week, Mrs. Berrill, Wednesdays an' Saturdays."

"Why Wednesdays an' Saturdays, Mrs. Chundle?"

"Wednesdays ter teach 'im the hemptiness o' riches, Mrs. Berrill, which 'e gets 'is pocket-money on Wednesdays — an' Saturdays to give 'im a chastened spirit fer the Sabbath — an' ter keep 'im from a sittin' sleepy in church, Mrs. Berrill."

Here the door opened suddenly and Tommy came in, very muddy, with a peaceful face, and a large rent in his coat.

"I say, Mrs. Chundle, do sew this up for me — hullo, Mrs. Berrill, that was a ripping tea you gave us last week — you are an absolute gem, Mrs. Chundle," and Tommy sat himself down on the kitchen bench, while Mrs. Chundle ruefully examined the coat.

In Mrs. Berrill's eye was a challenge, as who should say, "Now, Mrs. Chundle, arise and assert your authority, put down a firm foot and say, 'this shall not be.'"

That lady doubtless saw it, for she pursed

her lips and gazed at Tommy with some dignity.

"Mister Thomas," she began — but Tommy interrupted her.

"I say, I did n't know you an' Mrs. Berrill were pals. Mrs. Berrill gave me a huge tea the other day, Mrs. Chundle — awful good cake she makes, don't you, Mrs. Berrill? An', I say, Mrs. Berrill, has old — has Mrs. Chundle told you all about the Cholmondeleys, an' how they married, an' came to England — how long ago was it?" Mrs. Chundle blushed modestly.

"With William the Norming," she said gently.

"An' how she was derived from them, you know, an' all that?"

Mrs. Berrill nodded.

"We hall know as 'ow Mrs. Chundle is a — a very superior person," she said.

Mrs. Chundle stitched away in silent graciousness.

"Tommy," cried a distant voice — it was the poet's — "Tommy, come here,

I've just hit the bottle three times running."

Tommy grinned.

"I must go," he said. "I 'm jolly glad you and Mrs. Berrill are pals," and he disappeared in the direction of the poet.

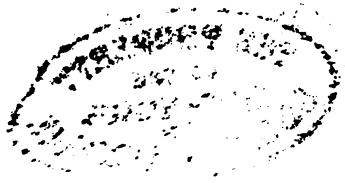
"Which I 'ope 'e won't turn out no worse than 'is dear father. God bless 'im," said Mrs. Berrill, as they discussed the tattered jacket.

And so the days tripped by, sunny and showery — true April days. Up in the downs was a new shrill bleating of lambs, and down in the valley rose the young wheat, green and strong and hopeful.

The water-meadows grew each day more velvety and luscious, as the young grass thickened, and between the stems, in the copse, came a shimmer of blue and gold, of blue-bell and primrose.

The stream sang buoyantly down at the mill, and Tommy wandered over the country-side, happy in it all — and indeed almost part of it.

Moreover, Madge and her governess



would often come upon him, all unexpectedly, too, in some byway of their daily travel, and he would show them flowers and bird's-nests, and explain for their benefit the position of each farmhand and labourer in the commonwealth of Camslove, and thus the days went by so happily that they seemed to have vanished almost as they came, and on a morning Tommy woke up to the fact that the holidays had ended. A grim showery day it was, too — a day of driving wind and cold rain — and Tommy loitered dismally from arbour to house, and house to arbour.

The poet was busy on a new work, and Mrs. Chundle, too intent on marking and packing his clothes to be good company.

Madge would be indoors, as it was raining, and it was too cold and uninviting for a bath.

He spent the afternoon trudging about the muddy lanes with the doctor, but the evening found him desolate.

Ah, these sad days that form our characters, as men tell us — characters that, at times, we feel we could willingly dispense

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with, so that the days might be always sunny, and the horizons clear.

Even the longest of dreary days ends at last, however, and Tommy fell sorrowfully asleep in the summer house, a rain-drop rolling dismally down his freckled nose, and his mind held captive by troubled visions of school.

A day or two after Tommy's departure, the poet stooped, in a side path of his garden, to pick up a stray sheet of paper.

On it he saw two words in his own handwriting.

"Mollie — folly — "

He sighed.

"I remember," he said.

Then he looked again, for in a round, sprawling hand was written yet another word — "jolly."

The poet wiped his glasses and folded up the paper.

Then he coughed.

"I had not thought of that," he observed, meditatively.

VI

IN WHICH FOUR MEN MEET A TRAIN

A HOT August noon blazed over Becklington common, as I lay thinking and thinking, staring up into the blue sky, and for all the richness of the day, sad enough in heart.

In the valley below me the stream still splashed happily down to the mill, and away on the far hills the white flocks were grazing peacefully as ever.

And above my head poised and quivering sang a lark.

The Spring had rounded into maturity, and Summer, lavish and wonderful and queenly, rested on her throne.

Why should there be war anywhere in the world? I asked.

And yet along a far frontier it flickered even now, sinister and relentless. A little war and, to me, a silent one — yet there it rose and fell and smouldered, and grew fierce, and in the grip of it two brave grey eyes had closed forever.

I heard the quiet, well-known voice.

"Tommy is not an ordinary boy," it said.

How we had smiled at the simple honest pride that this soldier had taken in his son.

I turned over and groaned, as I thought of it all — our parting in the old study — our promise — the half-comedy, half-responsibility of the situation.

And we had borne it so lightly, tossed for the boy, taken him more as an obstreperous plaything than a serious charge.

And now — well it matters not upon which of us the mantle of his legal guardian had fallen, nor upon whom lay the administration of his affairs — for we all had silently renewed our vows to one who was dead, and felt that there was something sacred in this mission, which lay upon the shoulders of each one of us.

Poor Tommy — none of us knew how the blow had taken him, for to none of us had he written since the news reached England, save indeed when, in a brief line to me, he had announced his return next week.

We had all written to him, as our separate natures and feelings had dictated, but no reply had reached us — and how should we know that of all the letters he had received, only one was deemed worthy of preservation — and that written in a round childish hand?

"Dear Tommy — I am so sorry. Your loving Madge."

A damp sorry little note it was, but it remained in Tommy's pocket long after our more stately compositions had been torn up and forgotten.

To us, leading our quiet commonplace peaceful life in this little midland village, the shock had come with double force.

Perhaps we had been apt to dwell so little on the eternal verities of chance and change and life and death as to have become almost oblivious of their existence, at any rate in our own sphere.

Those of the villagers who, year by year, in twos and threes, were gathered to their fathers, were old and wrinkled and ready for

death, resting quietly under the good red earth, well content with sleep.

And these we had missed, but scarcely mourned, feeling that, in the fitness of things, it was well that they should cease from toil.

But here was our friend, straight and strong and vigorous, cut down by some robber bullet in an Indian pass — and to us all, I fancy, the shock came with something of terror, and something of awakening in its tragedy. Outwardly we had shown little enough.

The poet, when the first stun of the blow had passed, had written his grief in the best lines I had ever seen from his pen.

The vicar had preached a quiet scholarly sermon in our friend's memory.

And now all reference to the dead had ceased among us, for the time.

To-morrow, Tommy was to come back from school, and all of us, I fancy, dreaded the first meeting.

We had arranged that each of our houses was to be open to him, and that in each a bed

should be prepared, so that, as the mood took him, he might sleep where he thought best.

But the meeting, at the station, was a matter of considerable trepidation to us.

I strolled down the hill to the poet's house.

"Good morning," I said, "I — I am rather keen on running up to town, to-morrow, to see those pictures, you know."

The poet smiled.

"I did not know you were a patron of art," he observed. "I am gratified at this development."

"Ah — could you meet Tommy at 2.15?"

The poet's face fell.

"I — I am very busy," he said, deprecatingly.

"'Lucien and Angelica' ought to be concluded by to-morrow evening."

We were silent, both looking into the trembling haze, up the valley.

"The doctor," suggested the poet.

"I will try."

But the doctor was also very much engaged.

"Two cases up at Bonnor, in the downs," he explained.

I called on the vicar.

"I — I want to go up to town to see that china exhibit," I observed.

He looked interested.

"I didn't know you were a connoisseur," he remarked.

"Not at all, not at all — the merest tyro."

"I am glad. You will find the show well worth your attention."

I bent my head to the vicar's roses.

"These Richardsons are very lovely," I said.

The vicar smiled.

"I think they have repaid a little trouble," he said modestly.

"Ah — could you possibly meet the 2.15 to-morrow?"

"You are expecting a parcel?"

"No — not exactly. Tommy, you know."

The vicar took a turn on the lawn. Then he came to a standstill in front of me.

"I had planned a visit to Becklington," he said.

I bowed.

"I am sorry," said I, and turned to go.

At the gate he touched my shoulder.

"Mathews!"

I paused.

"I am a coward, Mathews — but I will go."

We looked into each other's eyes, and I repented.

"No, old friend. I ought to go and I will go. By Jove, I will."

"So be it," said the vicar.

I had played with my luncheon, to the concern of my man, who regarded me anxiously.

"Are you not well, sir?" he asked.

"Quite well," I replied, icily, with a remark about bad cooking, and careless service, and strode towards the station.

I paced the platform moodily twenty

minutes before the advertised arrival of the train.

I was very early, but somebody, apparently, was before me.

I caught a glimpse of a strangely characteristic hat in the corner of the little waiting-room.

Its shapelessness was familiar.

I looked in, and the poet seemed a little confused.

"Lucien and Angel—?" I began, enquiringly.

He waved his hand, with some superiority.

"Inspiration cannot be commanded," he observed. "They shall wait until Saturday."

We sat down in the shade, and conversation flagged. Presently steps approached, pacing slowly along the wooden platform.

It was the vicar.

He looked a little conscious, and no doubt read the enquiry in my eyes.

"It is too hot," he said, "to drive to Becklington before tea," and the three of us sat silently down together.

At last a porter came, and looked up and down the line.

Apparently he saw no obstruction, for he proceeded to lower the signal.

We rose and paced to and fro, with valorously concealed agitation.

A trap dashed along the white road, and some one ran, breathlessly, up the stairs.

He seemed a little surprised at the trio which awaited him.

"I thought you had two cases in Bonnor," I observed, with a piercing glance.

The doctor looked away, but did not reply, and I forbore to press the point.

Far down the line shone a cloudlet of white smoke and the gleam of brass through the dust.

"Becklington, Harrowley, Borcombe and Hoxford train," roared the porter, apparently as a reminder to the station-master, for there were no passengers.

We stood, a nervous group, in the shadow of the waiting-room.

"Poor boy — poor little chap," said the

vicar at last. "We must cheer him up — God bless him."

Youth is not careless of grief, but God has made it the master of sorrow, and Tommy's eyes were bright, as he jumped onto the platform.

He smiled complacently into our anxious faces — so genuine a smile that our poor carved ones relaxed into reality.

"I've got a ripping chameleon," he observed cheerfully.

VII

IN WHICH MADGE WHISTLES IN A WOOD

THROUGH the still boughs the sunlight fell, as it seemed to me, in little molten streams, and I pushed back my chair still deeper into the shadow of the elm.

Even there it was not cool, but at any rate the contrast to the glaring close-cropped lawn was welcome.

I stared up through the listless, delicate leaves into a sky of Mediterranean blue. Surely, it was the hottest day of summer — of memory.

The flowers with which my little garden is so profusely peopled hung languorously above the borders, and the hum of a binder in the neighbouring wheat field seemed an invitation to siesta.

Down sunny paths, I dropped into oblivion.

A touch awoke me, but my eyes were held tight beneath a pair of cool hands.

"Good gracious," I gasped. "Bless my ——"

Tommy laughed and sauntered into view.

"You were making a beastly row," he observed, frankly. "I thought it was a thunderstorm."

I looked at him with envious eyes.

His sole attire consisted of a striped blazer and a pair of knickerbockers. He was crowned in a battered wideawake hat, and from this to the tips of his brown toes he looked buoyant and cool despite the tan on his chest and legs.

He deposited the rest of his garments and a towel upon the grass, and sprawled contentedly beside them.

"It was so jolly hot that I did n't bother about dressing," he observed, lazily.

Then he sat up quickly.

"I say; you don't mind, do you? it 's awful slack of me to come round here like this."

"Not a bit," said I, as my thoughts fled back to the days when I also was lean and

springy, and blissfully contemptuous of changes in the weather.

Ah, well-a-day — well-a-day!

Linger the dreams of the golden days —
They were bright, though they fled so soon,
Rosy they gleamed in the early rays
Of the sun, that dispelled them at noon.

The joys of reminiscence are mellow, but at times they may become a little soporific — I awoke with a start.

"Whoo — ee."

It was a whistle, low and penetrating, and would seem to have risen from the wood beyond the stream.

I noticed that Tommy was alert and listening.

"Whoo — ee."

Again it rose, with something of caution in its tone, but a spice of daring in the higher note of its conclusion.

I watched Tommy, idly, with half-closed eyes.

He was performing a rapid toilet.

Presently he looked up at me from his shoe-laces.

"I taught her that whistle," he observed, complacently.

"Whom?" I asked.

"Why, Madge — Madge Chantrey," he said.

"You seem to have found an apt pupil."

"Rather."

"But I hope," I spoke severely, "I trust, Tommy, that you have n't taught her to play truant."

He looked at me, cheekily; then he vanished through the gate.

"Happy dreams," he said, "and, I say, don't snore *quite* so loudly, you know."

And I heard him singing as he ran through the wood.

Said Madge, from the first stile, on the right:

"I managed it beautifully; she was reading some of those stupid rhymes by the poet — only I ought n't to call them names, because he 's a friend of yours — and I watched

her getting sleepier and sleepier, and then I came through the little gate behind the greenhouse and simply ran all the way, and, I expect, she 's fast asleep, and I wonder why grown-up people always go to sleep in the very best part of all the day."

"I think it's their indigestions, you know," said Tommy thoughtfully.

"But they never eat anything all day — only huge big feeds at night."

"I think everybody's a *little* sleepy after lunch."

"I 'm not."

"Not after two helps of jam roll?"

"How do you know I had two helps?"

"Never mind," said Tommy, then.

"See that spadger," he cried suddenly.

"Got him, no — missed him, by Jove."

The sparrow was twittering, mockingly, hehind the hedge, and a bright-eyed rabbit scuttled into safety.

"Let's go through the park," cried Tommy.

"I 'll show you a ripping little path, right

by the house, where there 's a cave I made before — no one knows it but father and I, an' you can go right by it, an' never see it. Come on."

They scrambled over the iron railings that bound the neat, though modest, domain surrounding Camslove Grange. Through the tall tree trunks they could see the old house with its rough battlements and extended wings. In front of it the trim lawns sloped down to the stream, while behind, the Italian garden was cut out of a wild tangle of shrubs and brushwood.

Into this Tommy plunged, with the unerring steps of long acquaintance, holding back the branches, as Madge followed close upon his heels.

Once he turned, and looked back eagerly into her eyes.

"We 're just by the path now — Is n't it grand?"

"Rather," she said.

Presently, with much labour, they reached a microscopical track through the underwood.

"There," observed Tommy, with the proud air of a proprietor, "Did n't I tell you?"

"No one could possibly find it, I should think," said Madge.

"Rather not. Let 's go to the cave."

Followed some further scrambling, and Tommy drew back the bushes triumphantly.

"See —" he began, but the words died upon his lips, for there, standing all unabashed upon this sacred ground, was a boy about his own age.

Tommy stammered and grew silent, looking amazedly at the stranger. He was a pale boy with dark eyes, and a Jewish nose.

"You are trespassing," he said coolly.

Tommy gasped.

"Who — who are you?" he asked at last.

"I tell you you are trespassing."

Tommy flushed.

"I 'm not," he said. "I — I belong here."

The other boy gave a shout.

"Father," he cried, "Here's some trespassers."

Tommy stood his ground, surveying the intruder with some contempt, while Madge wide-eyed held his arm.

There were footsteps through the bushes, and a tall stout man in a panama hat came into view.

"Hullo," he said, "This is private property, you know."

Tommy looked at him gravely.

"I don't understand — I — I belong here, you know."

The big man smiled.

"You're a native, are you?" he said cheerfully. "Well, you're a pretty healthy looking specimen — but this place here is mine — for the time, at any rate."

"It was my father's," said Tommy, with a strange huskiness in his throat.

"Don't know anything about that — got it from the agents for six years — like to see the deed, heh?" and he chuckled, a little ponderously.

Tommy looked downcast and hesitant, and the big man turned to his son.

"Well, well," he said, "I guess they 'll know better next time. Take 'em down the drive, Ernie, and show 'em out decently."

The three walked silently down the old avenue.

At the gate, the pale boy turned to Tommy.

"Back my father's got more money than yours," he said.

Tommy's eyes swept him with a look of profound contempt, but a lump in his throat forbade retort, and he turned away silent.

Madge, dear little woman, saw the sorrow in his eyes, and held her peace, picking flowers from the bank as they walked slowly down the path.

On a green spray a little way ahead a bird was singing full-throated and joyous, but to Tommy its music was mockery.

He took a long aim and brought the little songster, warm and quivering, on to the pathway in front of them.

As they came to it he kicked it aside, but Madge, stooping, lifted it from the long grass and hid it, quite dead, in her frock.

The tears had risen to her eyes, and she was on the point of challenging this seemingly wanton cruelty.

But there was something in Tommy's face that her eyes were quick to notice, and she was silent.

Thus is tact so largely a matter of instinct.

And, in a minute, Tommy turned to her,

"I — I should jolly well like to — to kill that chap," he said.

Madge said nothing, fondling the warm little body that she held beneath her pinafore.

As they turned the corner of the hedge, they came into the full flood of the sunlight over the meadows, and Tommy smiled.

"I say, I 'm awfully sorry we should have got turned out like that, Madge, but I — I did n't know there was somebody else in

there — an' that I was n't to go there, an' that."

"Never mind," said Madge, "let 's come up home, and I 'll show you my cave — I 've got one, too. It 's not so good as yours, of course, because you 're a boy, but I think it 's very pretty all the same, and it 's *almost* as hard to get at."

VIII

IN WHICH TWO ADJECTIVES ARE APPLIED TO TOMMY

My lady's lawn is splashed with shade
All intertwined with sun,
And strayingly beneath the boughs
Their tapestry is spun,
For the angel hands of summer-time
Have woven them in one.

My lady's lawn is wrapped with peace,
Its life throbs sweet and strong.
Caressingly across its breast
The laughing breezes throng,
And the angel wings of summer-time
Have touched it into song.

"Thank you," said Lady Chantrey. "I feel so honoured, you know, to have my little garden immortalised in verse."

The poet wrapped up his papers and restored them to his pocket, with a smile.

"Not immortalised, Lady Chantrey," he replied modestly, "not even described — only, if I may say so, appreciated."

From her invalid chair, in the shade, Lady Chantrey looked out over the lawn, sunny and fragrant, a sweet foreground to the wide hills beyond.

She turned to the poet with something like a sigh,

"I wonder why it is that we fortunate ones are so few," she said. "Why we few should be allowed to drown ourselves in all this beauty, that so many can only dream about. It would almost seem a waste of earth's good things."

The poet was silent.

"After all, they can dream — the others, I mean," he said, presently.

"But never attain."

"It is good that they know it is all here — somewhere."

Lady Chantrey lay back in her chair.

"I wish I could give it to them," she said, opening her hands. "I wish I could give it to them, but I am so stupid, and weak, and poor; — you can."

"I?" stammered the poet.

She looked at him, with bright eyes.

"You have the gift," she said. "You can at any rate minister to their dreams."

"But nobody reads poetry, and I — I do not write for the crowd."

She shook her head.

"I think everybody reads poetry," she said, "and I think, in every house, if one could but find it, there is some line or thought or dream, if you will, cut out, long since, and guarded secretly — and more, read — read often, as a memory, perhaps only as a dream, but, for all that, a very present help — I would like to be the writer of such a poem."

"It would certainly be gratifying," assented the poet.

"It would be worth living for."

The poet looked at her gravely — at the sweet-lined face, and the white hair, and tired grey eyes.

"Do you know, Lady Chantrey," he said, "you always give me fresh inspiration. I — I wonder —"

But what the poet wondered was only the wonder, I suppose, of all writers of all ages, and, in any case, it was not put into words, for across the lawn came a rustle of silk and muslin, heralding visitors, and the poet became busy about tea-cups and cream.

Though physical weakness, and want of means, prevented Lady Chantrey from entertaining to any large extent, yet I doubt if any woman in the county was more really popular than this gentle hostess of Becklington Hall; for Lady Chantrey was of those who had gained the three choicest gifts of suffering — sweetness and forbearance and sympathy.

Such as Lady Chantrey never want for friends, for indeed they give, I fancy, more than they receive.

On this sunny afternoon several groups were dotted about the cool lawns of Becklington, when Tommy and Madge came tea-wards from the cave.

Lady Chantrey beckoned them to her side.

"I am so glad to see you again, Tommy," she said. "You never come to see me now. I suppose old women are poor company."

"I wish they were all like you," said Tommy, squatting upon the grass at her feet.

Then he remembered a question he had meant to ask her,

"I say, Lady Chantrey, who 's living at the Grange?"

She shook her head.

"I don't know, Tommy. I heard that your guardian had let it — it was your father's wish, you know — but I did not know the tenants had arrived."

"Oh, Lady Chantrey, there 's a boy there, an' he 's such an awful cad."

"Cad?" echoed Lady Chantrey, questioningly.

"He — he is n't one little atom of a gentleman."

"And therefore a cad?"

Tommy coloured.

"He 's an awful bounder, Lady Chantrey."

Everybody was busy in conversation, and Lady Chantrey laid a frail hand on Tommy's shoulder — then,

"Tommy," she said in a low voice, "a gentleman never calls anyone a cad — for that reason. It implies a comparison, you see."

Tommy blushed furiously, and looked away.

"I — I 'm awful sorry. Lady Chantrey," he mumbled.

"Tell me about your holidays," she said.

A servant stepped across the lawn to Lady Chantrey's chair followed by a stout lady, in red silk.

"Mrs. Cholmondeley," she announced.

"And how do you do, my dear Lady Chantrey? Feeling a little stronger, I hope. Ah, that's very delightful. Is n't it too hot for anything? I have just been calling at the dear Earl's — Lady Florence is looking *so* well —"

Mrs. Cholmondeley swept the little circle gathered about the tea-table with a quick

glance. It is good to have the Earl on one's visiting list.

Her eyes rested on Mollie Gerald, pouring out tea, and she turned to Lady Chantrey:

"Is that the young person who has been so successful with your daughter's music, Lady Chantrey?"

Mollie's cheeks were scarlet, as she bent over the tea-pot, for Mrs. Cholmondeley's lower tones were as incisive as her ordinary voice was strident.

"Yes, that is my friend, Miss Gerald," said Lady Chantrey, smiling at Mollie.

Mrs. Cholmondeley continued a diatribe upon governesses.

"You never know, *dear* Lady Chantrey, who they may be. So many of them are so exceedingly —"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I have been very fortunate," said Lady Chantrey.

Tommy wandered up with some cake, which he offered to Mrs. Cholmondeley, who smiled graciously.

"And who is this?" she asked.

Lady Chantrey explained.

"Not the poor colonel's heir?"

Lady Chantrey nodded.

"Really; how interesting — how are you, my dear?"

"All right," said Tommy, in obvious good health.

"This is Mrs. Cholmondeley, of Barnardley."

Tommy looked interested.

"I 've heard about you from Mrs. Chundle," he said. "She 's a sort of relation of yours, derived from the same lot, you know."

Mrs. Cholmondeley looked a little bewildered, and the poet patently nervous.

"Really I —"

"She 's an awful good sort — Mrs. Chundle. She 's the poet's housekeeper — so I expect she has to work for her living, you know."

The poet gasped.

"It 's — it 's all a mistake," he stammered, but not before Mrs. Cholmondeley had

turned a violent purple, and a smile had travelled round the little ring of visitors.

All at once Tommy became aware that somehow things had gone wrong and retreated hastily from the lawn, seeking the refuge of the cave among the laurels, and in a minute or two, the poet, with a murmured pretext about a view, also vanished.

Tommy wandered disconsolately down the flagged path between the bushes, ruminating upon the strange contrariness of affairs on this chequered afternoon.

Near the arbour in the laurels Miss Gerald met him.

Her eyes were dancing.

"O, Tommy, you celestial boy," she cried.

Tommy was doubtful of the adjective, but the tone was certainly one of approbation, and he looked modestly at the path.

"You 're a perfect young angel," proceeded Miss Gerald, enthusiastically, "and I 'd kiss you only I suppose you would n't like it."

Tommy looked at her, dubiously.

"I should n't very much," he observed, but chivalry stepped manfully to the fore, and he turned a brown cheek towards her.

"You can if you like, you know," he added, looking resignedly across the valley.

She stooped and dropped a kiss upon his cheek.

"You 're the very broth of a boy," she said, as she ran back to the house.

Presently the laurels rustled, and the poet stole out into the pathway.

Tommy was disappearing into a sidewalk, and the poet looked after him with a curious expression.

"O you incomprehensible person," said he.

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IX

IN WHICH TOMMY CLIMBS A STILE

"You dare n't climb into the hay-loft."

"Dare n't I?" said Tommy, scornfully. "You see if I don't." And he shinned easily up the ladder.

The hay-loft was cool and fragrant — a welcome contrast to the glaring yard.

"Come up too," said Tommy.

Madge's black eyes flashed.

"I will," she said, clambering up the steps.

Tommy stooped down and gave her a hand.

"Good girl," he said, approvingly. Then he laid his hand on her lips, and they crouched back into the shade.

For into the barn stepped one of the farm labourers.

"We must n't get found out, for the man here is an awful beast of a chap," said Tommy, in a low whisper.

The labourer had not perceived them and

was soon bent over a machine chopping up fodder for the cattle.

His back was towards them, and he breathed heavily, for the work was hard. His red neck formed a tempting target, and Tommy was an accurate shot. Moreover, his pockets were full of peas.

He took a careful aim and let fly, and there was a hoarse exclamation from the man at the wheel.

Tommy drew back into shelter, where Madge was curled up in the new hay.

"Got him rippingly," said Tommy, "plumb in the back of the neck."

Madge looked a little reproachful.

"O Tommy, it must have hurt him dreadfully."

Tommy chuckled.

"'Spect it did tickle him a bit," he said, looking cautiously round the corner.

The man had resumed work and the hum of the wheel filled the barn.

Tommy selected another portion of the man's anatomy and let fly a little harder.

There was a shout and a sound of muttered exclamation in the barn below them, as Tommy backed into the hay with quiet enjoyment.

As they listened they could hear the man stumping round the barn, swearing softly, and presently he was joined by some one else, for a loud voice broke into his grumbling.

"What the dickens are you doing, Jake?"

"Darned if I know," said the man. "On'y there bees summat as hits I unnever I goes at the wheel, master."

"That 's the farmer himself just come in," said Tommy burrowing deeper into the hay.

They could hear him speaking.

"Get on wi' your work, Jake, an' don't get talkin' your nonsense to me, man."

The man grumbled.

"Darned if it are nonsense, master," he said. "Just you wait till you be hit yoursen — right in the bark o' your neck, too."

"O Tommy, do hit him — the farmer I mean."

Tommy shook his head.

"It would n't do," he said.

Madge looked at him with a challenge in her eyes.

"You dare n't," she whispered.

Tommy flushed.

"We should be caught."

"Oh — then you dare n't?"

Tommy was silent, and the farmer's foot was heavy in the barn below.

"You dare n't," repeated Madge.

Tommy looked at her, with bright eyes.

"All right," he said. "If you want to see, look round the corner, only don't let him cob you."

Then he drew back a little from the opening and took a flying shot, finding a target in one of the farmer's rather conspicuous ears.

He gave a sudden yell, and his pale eyes seemed to stand out from his head, as he looked amazedly round the building.

The man at the wheel spat into his hands, with a quiet grin.

"Darned if they ain't hit you, master," he said, grinding with some zest.

"My word, they shall pay for it," shouted the farmer, conning the situation with frowning brows.

Then he stepped to the ladder.

"See as they don't get out, Jake, if I send anyone down," he said loudly, and Jake grunted an assent.

Madge was trembling.

"O Tommy, I 'm so sorry. It 's all my fault. Tell him it 's all my fault."

"It 's all right," said Tommy cheerfully, "He — he won't dare to touch me."

A pair of red cheeks appeared above the floor of the loft, and the pale eyes looked threateningly into the gloom.

In a minute they encountered Tommy's brown ones, bright and defiant.

The farmer grunted.

"Bees you there, eh?" he asked.

Tommy grinned.

"All right, you need n't get shirty," he said.

"Shirty, eh? I wunt get shirty. Don't you make no mistake. Jake!"

"Ah!"

"My stick down there?"

"Ah."

"Will you 'ave it up 'ere or down yon, young man?"

Tommy flushed hotly, and Madge held his arm.

"You dare n't hit me," he said.

The farmer laughed.

"You 've bin trespassin' more 'n once, young man, wi' your catapult an' your sharp tongue, an' now I 'm goin' to 'ave my bit. Up 'ere or down yon?"

Tommy temporized.

"Let us come down," he said, eyeing the door warily.

"Young miss, you get down first," said the farmer.

Madge obeyed with pale cheeks, and stood, half in sunlight, at the door.

"Jake!"

"Ah!"

"See the young rip don't get out."

"Ah!"

Tommy clambered down, standing between the two men. Then he made a bolt for freedom, dodging Jake's half-hearted attempt at resistance.

But the farmer held him as he recoiled from Jake and jerked him over a truss of hay.

And for the next few minutes Tommy was very uncomfortable.

"Oh, you cad, you cad, you beastly, putrid cad."

Tommy spoke between his teeth at each stroke of the farmer's stick.

The man released him in a minute or two, and Tommy rushed at him with both fists. The farmer laughed.

"Guess you won't come knockin' about this barn again in a hurry," he said as he pushed him easily into the yard and closed the great door with a thud.

For a moment Tommy stood, white with anger. Then he thought of Madge, who

had been a spectator of the tragedy. But she was nowhere to be seen, and he walked gloomily down the lane.

Now Madge, with a beating heart and a stricken conscience, had fled for help, running blindly down the lane, with the idea of securing the first ally who should appear.

And she almost ran into the arms of the pale boy from the Grange.

"Hullo, what's the matter?" he asked, looking at Madge curiously.

Madge blurted out the story, with eager eyes.

'Could he help her? Was there anybody near who could save Tommy from a probable and violent death?'

The pale boy looked at her admiringly, as he considered the question.

Then,

"My father knows the man — he owes my father some money, I think. I'll see if I can do anything."

They ran down the lane together, and

doing so encountered Tommy, flushed and ruffled.

"O, Tommy" — Madge began, but stopped suddenly, at the look on Tommy's face.

For to Tommy this seemed the lowest depth of his degradation, that the pale boy should be a witness of his discomfiture.

He looked at them angrily, and then, turning on his heel, struck out across the fields, the iron entering deeply into his soul.

Youth is imitative, and Tommy had often heard the phrase.

"I — I don't care a damn," he said.

For a moment he felt half-frightened, but the birds were still singing in the hedge, and, in the next field, the reapers still chattered gaily at their work.

Moreover, the phrase seemed both consolatory and emphatic.

"I don't care a damn," he repeated, slowly, climbing the stile, into the next field.

Said a voice from behind the hedge:

"Girl in it?"

Tommy looked round, and encountered a tall young man in tweeds. He was looking at him, with amused eyes.

"I — I don't know what you mean," said Tommy.

The young man laughed.

"They're the devil, girls are," he observed.

Tommy was puzzled and eyed the stranger cautiously, thinking him the handsomest man he had seen.

Nor, in a way, was he at fault, for the young man was straight, and tall, and comely.

But there was something in the eyes — a lack of honest lustre — and in the lips — too sensuous for true manliness, that would have warned Tommy, had he been older, or even in a different frame of mind. Just now, however, a friend was welcome, and Tommy told his tale, as they strolled through the fields together.

Presently,

"You belong to Camslove Grange, don't you?" asked the stranger.

"I did."

"And will again, I suppose, eh?"

Tommy looked doubtful, and the young man laughed.

"Sorry — I ought to have put it the other way round, for it will belong to you."

Tommy shook his head.

"I don't think so," he said. "Some other Johnny's got it, you see."

The young man looked at his watch.

"My name's Morris — I live at Borcombe House — you'd better come and feed with me."

"Thanks, I'd like to, awfully."

"That's right — the old man will be glad to see you, and we'll have a game of billiards."

"I can't play."

"Never mind. I'll teach you — good game, pills."

Squire Morris was cordial from the grip of his hand to the moisture in his baggy eyes.

"The heir of Camslove," he said. "Well,

well, I am so glad to see you, dear boy, so very glad to see you. You must come often."

For a moment a misgiving arose in Tommy's heart.

"Did you know my father?" he asked, as the old man held his hand.

"Yes, yes; not as well as I would have liked to know him, by no means as well as I would have liked to know him — but I knew him, oh yes. I knew him well enough."

Tommy felt reassured, and the three entered the old hall, hung with trophies of gun and rod and chase.

"A bachelor's abode," laughed the young man. "We 're wedded to sport — no use for girls here, eh dad?"

The squire laughed wheezily.

"The dog," he chuckled, "the young dog."

Presently the squire led them to the dining room, where a bountiful meal was spread — so bountiful that Tommy,

already predisposed for friendship, rapidly thawed into intimacy.

Both the squire and his son seemed intent on amusing him, and Tommy took the evident effort for the unaccomplished deed — for, in truth, the stories that they told were almost unintelligible to him, though, to the others, they appeared humorous enough.

Presently the squire grew even more affectionate. He had always loved boys, he said, and Tommy was not to forget it. He was a stern enemy, but a good friend, and Tommy was not to forget it. He would always be proud to shake hands with Tommy, wherever he met him, and Tommy was to keep this in remembrance.

Presently he retired to the sofa, with a cigar, which he was continually dropping.

The young man winked, genially, at Tommy.

"He always gets sleepy about this time," he explained.

"Sleepy?" interrupted his father, "not a

bit of it. See here," and he filled the three glasses once more from the decanter.

"To the master of Camslove Grange," he cried, lifting his glass. And they drank the health, standing.

As Tommy walked home over the starlit fields, the scene came back to him.

The old man, wheezy but gracious, his son flushed and handsome, the panelled walls and their trophies, and the sparkling glasses — a brave picture.

True — he was still sore, but the episode of the farmer and his stick seemed infinitely remote, and Madge and the pale boy, ghosts of an era past: for had he not drunk of the good red wine, and kept company with gentlemen?

X

IN WHICH I RECEIVE TWO WARNINGS, AND NEGLECT ONE

I SUPPOSE that, by this time, I had grown fond of Tommy, in a very real way, for, as the weeks passed by, I was quick to notice the change in the boy.

There was a suggestion of swagger and an assumption of manliness in his manner, that troubled me.

I noticed, too, that he avoided many of his old haunts.

Often he would strike out across the downs and be away from early morning until starlight, and concerning his adventures he would be strangely reticent.

But I do not profess to have fathomed the ways and moods of boys, and I merely shrugged my shoulders, perhaps a little sorrowfully.

"I suppose he is growing up," thought I. And yet, for all that, I could not keep myself from wondering what influence was

at work upon the boy's development. Even the doctor, who, of us all, saw the least of him, noticed the change, for he asked me suddenly, one late September day,

"What 's the matter with Tommy?"

I looked at him with feigned surprise.

"I — he 's all right, is n't he?"

The doctor shook his head.

"He has altered very much this summer, and I am afraid the alteration has not been good."

I cut at a nettle with my walking-stick.

"He is growing, of course."

The doctor raised his eyebrows.

"Then you have noticed nothing else — nothing in his demeanour or conversation — or friends?"

I abandoned my defences.

"Yes, I have noticed it, and I cannot understand it — and I am sorry for it."

"When does he return to school?"

"To-morrow."

The doctor appeared to be thinking. In a minute he looked into my face.

"It is a good thing, on the whole," he said, adding slowly.

"Don't drive the boy; let him forget."

He drove away, and I looked after him in some wonderment, for his words seemed enigmatical.

As I walked back to my garden I could hear Tommy whistling in his bedroom. There was a light in the room, and I could see him, half undressed, fondling one of his white rats. I remembered how he had insisted on their company and smiled.

"Sir."

From the shadow of the hedge a voice addressed me.

"Sir."

"Hullo," I said. Then, as I peered through the gloom, I saw a young woman standing before me, and, even in the dusk, I could read the eagerness in her eyes.

Her face was familiar.

"Surely I know you?" I asked.

"I 'm Liza Berrill."

She spoke rapidly; yet, over her message she seemed hesitant.

Then:

"Oh, sir, don't let him be friends wi' that gentleman."

I stared.

"What do you mean?"

She pointed to the window.

Tommy was in his night-shirt, with the white rat running over his shoulders.

"Well?"

"Master Tommy, sir. There 's a-many 'ave noticed it; don't let 'im get friends wi' ——"

"With whom?"

Even in the dusk I could see the dull crimson creep into her cheeks.

"Squire Morris's son," she muttered.

We stood silent and face to face for a minute.

"You understand, sir?"

I remembered, and held out my hand.

"Yes, Liza; I understand. Thank you."

"Good night, sir."

"Good night."

She ran, with light footsteps, down the lane, and I stood alone beneath the poplars.

Far up into the deepening sky they reached, like still black sentinels, and between them glimmered a few early stars. In his bedroom I could see Tommy, holding the white rat in one hand and kneeling a moment at his very transient prayers.

I remembered a day whereon the colonel's riding-whip had been laid about Squire Morris's shoulders.

My heart beat high at the thought, for the squire had insulted one whose sweet face had long lain still. I thought of the son.

"Poor Liza," I murmured, and lifted the garden latch.

And as I looked up at Tommy's darkened window:

"God forbid," I said.

Next morning I called Tommy aside.

"Do you know young Morris, of Borcombe?"

He nodded.

"Tommy, I — I wish you would endeavour to avoid him in the future. He is no fit companion for you."

"Why?"

"I — you would not understand yet, Tommy; you must take my word for it."

Tommy looked a little sullen.

"He 's a jolly good sort," he said. "I know him well; he 's a jolly good sort."

"I am asking you, Tommy," — I hesitated then. "For your father's sake," I added.

Tommy looked straight into my eyes.

"He was a friend of father's," he said, quietly.

"Your father thrashed the squire with his own hand; I saw him do it."

Tommy stood very still.

"Why?"

"I — I cannot explain it exactly; you must take my word."

Tommy turned on his heels.

"He 's a jolly good sort," he muttered.

"But you must not make him a friend."

Tommy was silent, kicking at the carpet.

"I shall if I like," he said, presently; and that was the last word.

And it was only when I came back, rather sadly, from the station that I remembered the doctor's words and found a meaning for them.

"Oh, what a fool I am!" I said.

XI

IN WHICH TOMMY IS IN PERIL

TOMMY spent his Christmas in town, with a distant relative, for I had been called abroad upon a matter of business, and his Easter holidays, since I was still away, were passed in Camslove vicarage.

It was, therefore, a year before I saw Tommy again, and on an August morning I met him at the little station.

I think we were both glad to see each other, and I found Tommy a little longer, perhaps a little leaner, but as brown and ruddy as ever.

"I say, it is ripping to get back here again, an' I 've got into the third eleven, an' that bat you sent me is an absolute clinker, an' how 's the poet, an' did you have a good time in Italy, an', I say, you are shoving on weight, you know, an' there 's old Berrill, an' I say, Berrill, that 's a ripping young jackdaw you sent, an' he 's an' awful thief — that is,

he was, you know, but young Jones's dog eat him, or most of him, an' I punched young Jones's head for letting 'em be together, an' I say — how ripping the downs are looking, are n't they?"

Tommy's spirits were infectious, and on the way home it would be hard to say which of us talked the most nonsense.

Our journey through the village was slow, for Tommy's friends were numerous, and spread out over the whole social scale, from the hand-to-mouth daysman to the unctuous chemist and stationer. They included the vicar, leaning over his garden gate, in his shirt-sleeves, surrounded by implements of horticulture, and also, I regret to say, the pot-boy of the Flaming Lion — a graceless young scamp, with poacher written in every lineament of his being.

I was not unprepared for his royal progress, since, during the summer, I had been frequently accosted by his friends, of varying rank and respectability, enquiring of "Master Thomas, sir."

"That young 'awk, sir, as I sent him last week?"

"Made many runs this year, sir, d' ye know?"

"Master Thomas in pretty good 'ealth, sir. Bad livin' in they big schools, sir, be n't it?"

And so on.

Far down the road I saw a horseman, but Tommy could not, by any means, be hurried, and a meeting I did not wish became inevitable.

As young Morris rode up he looked at me a little insolently — maybe it was only my fancy, for prejudice is a poor interpreter of expression — and nodded good day.

I saw that Tommy looked a little uncomfortable and his flow of chatter ceased suddenly.

Morris bent from the saddle and called him, and as I turned to the shop window I could hear them greeting one another.

I did not hear their further conversation, and it was only brief, but the Tommy who

walked home with me thenceforward was not the same who had met me so buoyantly at the station.

Ah, these clouds, that are no greater than a man's hand and by reason of their very slenderness are so difficult to dispel!

The early days of August sped away happily enough, and their adventures were merely those of field, and stream, and valley, engrossing enough of the time and fraught no doubt with lessons of experience, but too trivial, I suppose, for record.

And yet I would rather write of them than of the day — the 8th of August — when the Borcombe eleven beat Camslove by many runs.

And yet again, I am not sure, for a peril realised early, even through a fall, may be the presage of ultimate victory.

I had been in town all day myself, and therefore had not been amongst the enthusiastic little crowd gathered in the field behind the church to watch this annual encounter, and a typical English country crowd it was,

brimful of sport — see the eager movements of those gnarled hands and the light in the clear open-air eyes and wrinkled faces.

Camslove, too, had more than justified the prediction of their adherents and had made a hundred and fifty runs, a very creditable score.

"An' if they can stand Berrill's fast 'uns they bees good 'uns," chuckled they of Camslove, as they settled down to watch the Borcombe innings.

Tommy was hanging about the little tin-roofed pavilion, divided between a natural patriotism and a desire to see his hero perform wonders, for Squire Morris's son had consented to represent Borcombe.

Young Morris had never played for his village before, but his reputation as a cricketer was considerable, and the country-side awaited his display with some curiosity.

Nor were they disappointed, for in every way he played admirable cricket, and even Berrill's fast ones merely appeared to offer him opportunities of making boundary hits.

His fellow cricketers spent more or less brief periods in his company, and disconsolately sought the shade of the pavilion and the trees, but Morris flogged away so mercilessly that the Camslove score was easily surpassed, with three wickets yet to fall, and in the end Borcombe obtained a very solid victory.

Young Morris was not held in high esteem in the country-side, and there were many who cordially disliked him — it was even whispered that one or two had sworn, deeply, a condign revenge for certain deeds of his — but he had played the innings of a master, and, as such, he received great applause on his return to the pavilion.

Tommy was in the highest spirits, and, full of a reflected glory, strode manfully, on his hero's arm, down the village street.

In the bar-room of the Flaming Lion many healths were drunk to the victors, to the defeated, to Berrill's fast luns, to the young squire's long success, to Tommy Wideawake.

Tommy, flushed and exultant, stood

among the little group, with glowing cheeks.

Presently a grimy hand pulled his sleeve. It was the pot-boy.

"Don't 'ee 'ave no more, sir — not now," he whispered. But Tommy looked at him hotly.

"Can't a gentleman drink when he likes — damn you?" he asked.

The pot-boy slunk away, and a loud laugh rang round the little audience.

"Good on you, Tommy," cried Morris.

"Gentlemen, the girls — bless 'em." He filled their glasses, at his expense, and coupled a nameless wish with his toast.

Tommy, unconscious of its meaning, drank with the others.

Then he walked unsteadily to the door. There was a strange buzzing in his head, and a dawning feeling of nausea in him, which he strove to fight down.

And as he stood at the porch, flushed and bright-eyed, Madge Chantrey and the pale boy passed along the road. They were

going to meet Miss Gerald, but Tommy staggered out and faced them.

"Hullo, Madge, old girl," he said, but she drew back, staring at him, with wide eyes.

The pale boy laughed.

"Why, he's drunk — dead drunk," he said.

Tommy lurched forward and struck him in the face, and in a moment the pale boy had sent him rolling heavily in the road. I picked him up, for I was passing on my way home from the station, and noticed the flush on his cheeks, and saw that they were streaked with blood and dust.

They tell me that I, too, lost my temper, and even now I cannot remember all I said to Morris and his satellites and the little crowd in the Flaming Lion. I remember taking Tommy home, and helping my man to undress and wash him and put him to bed, and I shall never forget the evening that I spent downstairs in my study, staring dumbly over the misty val-

ley to the far downs, and seeing only two grave grey eyes looking rebukingly into mine.

Late in the evening the vicar joined me, and we sat silently together in the little study.

My man lit the lamp, and brought us our coffee, and came again to fetch it away, untasted.

Perhaps you smile as you read this.

"You ridiculous old men," I can hear you say. "To magnify so trivial an incident into a veritable calamity."

And, again, I can only plead that, in our quiet life, maybe, we attached undue importance to such a slight occurrence.

Yet, nevertheless, to us it was very real, almost overwhelmingly real, and the tragedy of it lay, nearly two years back, in the panelled study of Camslove Grange.

Presently the vicar looked at me, and his face, in the red lamplight, seemed almost haggard.

"'I could never repay the man who taught

my boy to love God,'" he repeated, "and he said those words to me — to me."

I bowed my head.

"And I — I accepted the responsibility, and it has come to this."

I was silent, and, indeed, what was there to say?

I suppose we both tried to think out the best course for the future, but for myself my brain refused to do aught but call up, and recall, and recall again, that last meeting in Camslove Grange:

"I want the old place to have a good master.

"I want my son to be a gentleman.

"God bless you, old comrades."

Back they came, those old ghosts of the past, until the gentle, well-bred voice seemed even now appealing to me, and the well-loved form apparent before my eyes. And I writhed in my chair.

A little later the poet came in. He looked almost frightened, and spoke in a hushed voice

"Is — is he better?" he asked.

"He is asleep," I answered, moodily.

The poet sighed.

"Ah! that 's good, that 's good."

For a little while we talked, the aimless, useless talk of unnerved men, and at last the poet suggested we should go upstairs.

As I held the candle over Tommy's bed we could see that the flush had faded from his cheeks, and as he lay there he might well have been a healthy cherub on some earthly holiday.

I think the sight cheered us all, and in some measure restored our hope.

The vicar turned to us, gravely.

"There is one thing we can all do," he said; "we ought to have thought of it first, and it is surely the best."

As we parted, the poet turned to me.

"I will take him over the downs with me to-morrow; they always appeal to Tommy, and one is never saner, or nearer to God, or more ready for repentance, than out there upon the ranges."

There was a sound of wheels down the lane, and in a minute the doctor drove by.

"Hullo," he called out, cheerily, "I have just got myself a new bat."

XII

IN WHICH TOMMY MAKES A RESOLVE

It is one of the privileges of youth that alimentary indulgence is but rarely penalized, and if either of us next morning was pale and disinclined for breakfast it was certainly not Tommy.

On the contrary, he seemed cool, and fit, and hungry, and although he looked at me occasionally in a shy, questioning way, yet he chattered away much as usual, and made no reference to yesterday's adventures.

Only when the poet called for him and at the window I laid a hand upon his shoulder to bid him a happy day, he turned to me, impulsively:

"You are a ripper," he said.

There is no sweeter or more genuine praise than a boy's.

I watched them down the lane, and my eyes sought the downs, clear, and wide, and sunny. I thought of the tawdry inn, and

its associations, and prayed that Tommy might learn a lesson from the contrast.

Says Jasper the gipsy:

"Life is very sweet, brother; who would wish to die?"

Hark back to your well-thumbed Lavengro and you will find, if you do not remember, his reasons.

Nor are they weightier than these:

"Night and day, brother, both sweet things; sun, moon and stars, all sweet things; there's likewise a wind on the heath."

Deep in the heart of every boy lies something of the gipsy, and even if, in after life, it grows sick and stifled by reason of much traffic among crowded streets, yet I doubt if it ever so far vanishes that to it the wind on the heath shall appeal in vain. Nor was the poet wrong in his prognosis, for to Tommy, at any rate, it was full of unspoken messages on this August morning. Wind on the heath — yes, it is always there, clean, and strong, and happy, lingering with

soft wings over furze and bracken, full of whispered melodies from the harp of God.

Are you in trouble?

Go up and face this wind on the heath. Bare your head to it, open your lungs to it. Let it steal about your heart, with its messages of greatness, and futurity, and hope.

Are you listless and discouraged?

Go up and breathe this wind on the heath, and it will sting to life the ambition and resolve in you, and in it you will hear, if you listen aright, the saga of victory.

"In sickness, Jasper?"

"There 's the sun and stars, brother."

"In blindness, Jasper?"

"There 's the wind on the heath, brother: if I could only feel that, I would gladly live forever. Dosta, we 'll now go to the tents and put on the gloves, and I 'll try to make you feel what a sweet thing it is to be alive, brother."

Tommy and the poet were bound for some ruins which lay across Becklington common and beyond the downs.

Harvest ruled the world, and the fields in the valley and on the hillside were dotted with stooks and stacks.

It was a day on which it was good to be alive, and, if a little subdued, yet they were both in good spirits.

The poet's latest volume, ahead of the autumn rush of poetry and fiction, had been favourably criticised.

It was stronger, happier, more real, said the critics, than any other from his pen.

If not great, said they, it was at any rate graceful, and even, in some places, vigorous. Therefore was the poet happy.

And Tommy — well, there was the sun and the wind, good red blood in his arteries, and no care in his heart — and though he could not have told you so, these, no doubt, were strong enough reasons for the buoyancy of his spirit.

As they climbed the green side of the downs they met a shepherd singing, a happy, irresponsible fellow, with his coat over his head, and his sleek flock browsing round him.

And as they passed him with a welcome, the poet remembered some lines which he repeated to Tommy:

Wouldst a song o' shepherding, out upon the down,
Splendid days o' summer-time, an' roaring days o' spring?
I could sing it fine,
If e'er a word were mine,
But there 's no words could tell it you — the song that I would sing.

Wide horizons beckoning, far beyond the hill,
Little lazy villages, sleeping in the vale,
Greatness overhead
The flock's contented tread
An' trample o' the morning wind adown the open trail.

Bitter storms o' winter-time ringing down the range,
Angel nights above the hill, beautiful with rest,
I would sing o' Life,
O' Enterprise and Strife,
O' Love along the upland road, an' God beyond the crest.

An' this should be my matin song — magic o' the down,
Mystery, an' majesty, an' wistfulness, an' hope,
I would sing the lay
O' Destiny an' Day,
As morning mounts the hill with me, an' summer storms the slope.

But this would be my vesper song — best at last is Peace
Whispered where the valleys lie, all deep in dying gold,
Stealing through the gloam
To speed the shepherd home
With one last dreamy echo o' the music in the fold.

Wouldst a song o' shepherding, out upon the down,
Splendid days o' summer-time, an' roaring days o' spring?
I could sing it fine,
If e'er a word were mine,
But there 's no words could tell it you — the song that I would sing.

"Jolly good," said Tommy, easiest of critics, and the poet smiled.

"Ah, Tommy," he said, "I wish you were a publisher."

Over the crest of the downs rose a thin wisp of blue smoke; and as they descended on the other side, some dark-eyed children looked out of a little brown tent.

They reminded the poet of Jasper and his company of Pharaoh's children, and he repeated to Tommy the conversation I have touched upon.

Tommy's eyes sparkled.

"That 's good," he said, approvingly. "Just what a fellow feels, you know."

They walked on across the green springy turf, and for a time both were silent.

There was something, too, in the day and its purity that was speaking to Tommy.

Presently he spoke, hesitatingly.

"I — I was drunk last night, was n't I?" he asked anxiously.

The poet affected not to have heard the question, but Tommy persisted.

"Yes."

Tommy sighed.

"I say," he said, after a pause, "I — I 'd have licked that fellow hollow if my head had n't been so jolly queer."

The poet looked at him, curiously.

"I expect you would," he said.

Tommy took a deep breath, and looked straight at the poet.

"I 'll never touch it again — never," he said slowly.

They shook hands there on the hillside.

Thus it was, and for this reason, that Tommy took upon himself a vow that he has to my best belief never broken.

"Ah, but the motive?" you ask.

Well, maybe the shrug of your shoulder is justified, but, after all, the result was brought about by nature, who seldom errs, and to the poet, who, in spite of all, was really a simple soul — the result was abundantly gratifying.

As they walked home in the evening, Tommy turned to the poet.

"I say, what was it that gipsy fellow said — at the end, you know?"

"Dosta, we 'll now go to the tent and put on the gloves, and I 'll try to make you feel what a sweet thing it is to be alive, brother."

Tommy looked grimly into the twilight.

"It would be a jolly good thing to teach that fellow at the Grange," he said, "only I 'm blowed if I 'll take any gloves."

XIII

IN WHICH THE POET PLUCKS A FOXGLOVE

MADGE sat by the window, swinging disconsolate legs and struggling, with a nauseated heart, to master those Latin prepositions which govern the ablative case. A more degraded army she had never encountered, and though some misguided sage had committed them to rhyme, this device merely added a flavour of hypocrisy to their obvious malevolence. Moreover, the whole universe appeared to be so disgustingly cheerful that the contrast was well nigh unbearable.

Beyond the open window the day was young and bright, and the honey bees sang briskly over the lawn.

Even the gardener, most dismal of men, was humming: "A few more years shall roll," a sure sign of unwonted buoyancy of spirit. Miss Gerald was writing some letters for Lady Chantrey in another room, and Madge was alone in the study.

Thus, every factor combined to make temptation almost irresistible.

And, naturally enough, it came, and in the guise of a well-known, long-agreed-on whistle.

From the laurels it rose, low and clear, and Madge's heart jumped quickly as she heard, for the whistle was Tommy's, and she could not remember how long ago it was since she had heard it.

Then she remembered that it must not be answered — for was not Tommy in disgrace — at any rate, as far as she was concerned?

And had they not quarrelled so deeply that repair was almost an impossibility?

It was very presumptuous of him to think that she should answer it.

She would remain where she was, in icy stillness, mastering the prepositions with an iron hand.

A pleasing sense of virtue stole into her being, mixed with visions of a downcast, brown face somewhere in the shrubbery, and

for five long minutes silence reigned. Then the whistle rang out again, a little louder, and surely it sounded almost penitent.

A picture of a broken-hearted Tommy, whistling in dry-eyed sorrow, rose to her eyes.

It was true that his offences had been great, but then, was not forgiveness divine?

Madge felt sure that this was so. Was it not written in fair characters in her last copy-book?

She closed her book and stood by the glass doors.

It is but rarely that we rise to the divine. Yet here was an opportunity, and down the steps she ran, light-footed, over the thin strip of lawn and into the deep laurels.

And it was not Tommy after all, but only the pale boy who, with commendable perspicacity, had borrowed Tommy's whistle.

For a moment Madge flushed angrily, for she did not greatly like the pale boy, and this was a deception.

But the morning was sweet, and the pale boy was surely better than a preposition.

"I say: let's go through the wood," he said. "I've hidden some sandwiches in a tree up there and we'll have a picnic, and you can be back in time for lunch."

"All right," said Madge, "come along."

And in the wood they met Tommy, with the light of resolve in his eye and battle written in his face.

Madge was not quite sure whether she was glad or sorry to meet him, nor could she tell, as they looked straight into one another's eyes, the nature of Tommy's feelings on the subject.

He looked a little grave, and spoke as one who had rehearsed against a probable encounter.

"I want to apologise to you for our meeting the other day," he said stiffly.

Madge stared, and Tommy turned to the pale boy.

"And to you," he said.

The pale boy looked a little puzzled, but grinned.

"That's all right," he said. "I could see —"

"Excuse me, I have n't quite finished" — and the pale boy stopped, with his mouth open.

"I think you had better go home, Madge."

"Why — Tommy?"

Tommy looked down.

"You had better — really," he repeated.

The pale boy interposed.

"She is out with me," he said.

"So I see — she had better go home."

"Why — who says so?"

"If she does n't she will see you get a licking. P'raps — p'raps she would n't like that."

Tommy still looked at the path.

"I — I 'm not going to fight anyone to-day."

"You are — you're jolly well going to fight me, now."

The pale boy smiled, a little uncertainly.

"You — I should n't have thought you 'd want a second dose," he said.

"Rather," said Tommy, cheerfully.

Madge looked from one to the other.

"Don't fight," she said. "Please — please don't fight — why should you?"

"You 'd much better run home," said Tommy again.

"I shan't — I shall stay here."

Tommy sighed.

"All right," he said, taking off his coat. "Then, of course, you must, you know."

"I tell you I 'm not going to fight," repeated the pale boy.

"Rot," said Tommy.

Five minutes later Tommy contentedly resumed his coat, his face flushed with victory.

The pale boy was leaning against a tree, with a handkerchief to his nose and one eye awry, whimpering vindictive epithets at his opponent — but Madge was nowhere to be seen.

Tommy looked up and down the leafy vistas a little disappointedly. Then,

"Never mind," he said, philosophically.

"By Jove, it 's a jolly sweet thing is life — ripping, simply ripping. Good bye, old chap. Sniff upwards and it 'll soon stop. So long."

In a brake where the wood falls back a little from the inroad of the common the poet paused, for the gleam of a straw hat against a dark background caught his eye.

"Why surely — no — yes, it is — how singular — so it is," he murmured, wiping his glasses.

He left the path and struck out over the springy turf into the shade of the wood, keeping his eyes nevertheless upon the ground, and walking guilelessly, as one who contemplates.

And by chance his meditations were broken, and before him, among some tall foxgloves, stood Mollie Gerald.

The poet looked surprised.

"How — how quietly you must walk, Miss Gerald," he said.

She laughed.

"How deeply you must think," she said.

"It — it is good to wake from thought to — to this, you know," he answered, with a bow.

Miss Gerald looked comprehensively into the wood.

"It is pretty, is n't it?" she said.

"I was not referring to the wood," said the poet, hardily.

Miss Gerald bent over a foxglove rising gracefully over the bracken:

"Are n't they lovely?" she asked, showing the poet a handful of the purple flowers.

"You came out to gather flowers?"

"Why, no. I came to look for my pupil."

"Surely not again a truant?"

"I am afraid so."

"It is hard to believe."

"And I stopped in my search to gather some of these. After all, it is n't much good looking for a child in a wood, is it?"

"Quite useless, I should think."

"If they want to be found they 'll come home, and if they don't, they know the woods far better than we, and they 'll hide."

They always come back at meal-times — at least, Tommy does."

"I think meal-times are among the happiest hours of an average childhood."

"Before the higher faculties have gained their powers of appreciation — it depends on the child."

"Madge is not an imaginative child."

"Nor Tommy, I think, and yet I don't know. It is hard to appraise the impressions that children receive and cannot record."

"And the experiment — how does it progress?"

"Alas, it is an experiment no longer; it is a very real responsibility, and I am inadequate. Individually, I fancy we are all inadequate, and, collectively, we do not seem quite to have found the way."

Miss Gerald nodded emphatically.

"Good," she said.

"Eh?"

"To feel inadequate is the beginning of wisdom; is it not so? There, I have gathered my bunch."

"May I beg one foxglove for my coat?"

She laughed.

"There are plenty all round you. Why, you are standing in the middle of a plant at this moment."

The poet stooped a little disconsolately, and plucked a stalk, and when he looked up Miss Gerald was already threading her way through the slender trunks.

"Good-bye," she cried, gaily, over her shoulder, and the poet raised his hat.

As he sauntered back to the path the doctor rode by on his pony.

"Hullo," he said; "been picking flowers?"

The poet looked up.

"A pretty flower, the foxglove," he murmured.

"Digitalis purpurea — a drug, too, is it not?"

The doctor nodded.

"It has an action on the heart," he said. "Steadies and slows it, you know."

But the poet shook his head.

"I fancy you are mistaken," he observed.

XIV

IN WHICH TOMMY CONVERSES WITH THE PALE BOY

A SKY of stolid grey had communicated a certain spirit of melancholy to the country-side — a spirit not wholly out of keeping with Tommy's mood.

The holidays were nearly over. The doctor was busy, the poet had a cold, Madge had been sent away to school, and Tommy, for the nonce, felt a little at a loss to know how to occupy these last mournful days of freedom.

As he tramped, a trifle moodily, down the lane, a point of light against a dark corner of the hedge caught his eye, and further examination revealed the pale boy, smoking a cigarette.

Tommy had not yet aspired to tobacco, and for a moment felt a little resentful.

But the memory of last week's battle restored his equanimity, and, indeed, brought

with it a little complacent contempt for the pale boy and his ways.

"Hullo," said Tommy, pulling up in front of his reposing foe, and not sorry to have some one to talk to.

The pale boy looked at him coldly.

"Well," he observed, cheerlessly.

Tommy sat down on the grass.

"I say, let 's forget about all that," he said.

The pale boy puffed away in silence.

"Let 's forget; you — you 'd probably have whopped me, you know, if you 'd done some boxing at our place. You 've a much longer reach than me, an' — an' you got me an awful nasty hit in the chest, you know."

The pale boy looked at him gloomily.

"I don't profess to know much about fighting," he said, with some dignity. "I think it 's jolly low."

For a few minutes they sat in silence, then,

"Where do you go to school?" asked Tommy.

"I don't go anywhere; I 've got a tutor."

"Oh!"

"You see, I 'm not at all strong."

"Bad luck. You — ought you to smoke, if you 're — if your constitution 's rocky, you know?",

The pale boy knocked the ashes off his cigarette.

"I find it very soothing," he said. "Besides, it 's all right, if you smoke good stuff. I would n't advise fellows who did n't know their way about a bit to take it up."

The pale boy spoke with an air of superiority that awed Tommy a little.

"How — how did you come to know all about it?" he asked.

"Oh — just knocking about town, you know," replied the other, carelessly.

Tommy sighed.

"I hardly know anything about London," he said.

The pale boy looked at him, pityingly.

"I 've lived there all my life," he said, "Dormanter Gardens, in Bayswater — one of the best neighbourhoods, you know."

Tommy racked his memory.

"I was in London, at Christmas, with a sort of aunt-in-law," he said. "She lives in Eaton Square, I think it is — somewhere near Maskelyne & Cook's."

"I have n't heard of it," said the pale boy. "But London 's so jolly big that it 's impossible to know all of it, and I 've spent most of my time in the West End."

Tommy was silent, but the pale boy seemed at home with his subject.

"I suppose you don't know the Cherry House," he continued. "It 's an awful good place to feed in — near the Savoy, you know. Reggie, he 's my cousin, takes me there sometimes. He always goes. He says there are such damned fine girls there. I don't care a bit about 'em, though."

The pale boy smoked contemplatively.

"I think it 's awful rot, thinking such a beastly lot about girls, and all that sort of thing, you know, don't you?" said Tommy.

The pale boy nodded.

"Rather," he said. "I agree with dad.

He says there 's only one thing worth bothering about down here."

"What 's that?"

"Money," snapped the pale boy, looking at Tommy, between narrowed eyelids. "I'm going to be a financier when I 'm old enough to help dad."

Tommy stretched himself lazily.

"I 'd rather be strong," he said.

The pale boy looked at him, curiously.

"What a rum chap you are. What 's that got to do with it?"

Tommy lay back on the grass, and stared up at the passing clouds.

"I 'm not a bit keen on making money, somehow," he said. "I 'd just like to knock around, and have a dog, and — a jolly good time, you know."

"What — always?"

Tommy sat up.

"Yes — why not?"

The pale boy shrugged his shoulders, and laughed.

"Oh, I don't know," he said. "But it

seems funny, and don't you think you 'd find it rather slow?"

Tommy stared at him, with open eyes.

"Rather not," he said. "Why, think how ripping it would be to go just where you liked, and come back when you liked, an' not to have any beastly meal-times to worry about, an' no terms, an' a horse or two to ride, an' wear the oldest clothes you had; by Jove, it would be like — something like Heaven, I should think."

The pale boy laughed as he rose to his feet.

"It 's beginning to rain," he said.

"Never mind," said Tommy, "I like the rain. It does n't hurt, either, and I like talking to you; you make me think of things."

The pale boy turned up his collar, and shivered a little.

"Let 's find a shelter, somewhere," he said, looking round anxiously.

"We 'd better walk home over the common," said Tommy. "Besides, it 's ripping

walking in the rain, don't you think, an' it makes you feel so good, an' fit, when you 're having grub afterwards, in front of the fire."

But the pale boy shook his head.

" I hate it," he said, " and I 'm going up to the farm there, till it stops."

Tommy cast an accustomed eye round the horizon.

" It won't stop for a jolly long while," he said. " However, do as you like. We don't seem to agree about things much, do we ? So long."

" Good-bye. It 's all the way a fellow 's brought up, you know."

And as Tommy shouldered sturdily through the rain, the pale boy lit another cigarette and turned back towards the farm door.

XV

IN WHICH SOME PEOPLE MEET IN A WHEAT-FIELD

NEVER was such a harvest — such crops — such long splendid days — such great yellow moons. Even now the folk tell of it when harvest-time comes round.

"Ah," say they, and shake their heads, "that were a harvest an' no mistake, an' long, an' long will it be afore us sees another such a one."

Through the great white fields of wheat the binders sang from dew-dry to dew-fall, and over the hills rang the call of the reapers.

All hands were called to the gathering, the gipsies from the hedge and the shepherd from his early fold, and the stooks were built over the stubble and drawn away into stacks, and still the skies shone cloudless and the great moons rose over the dusk. Never was such a harvest. And little we at home saw of Tommy in these days, save when, late at

night, he would wander back from one and another field, lean and sunburnt and glad of sleep. One day the poet tracked him to the harvesting on the down-side fields, and found him in his shirt-sleeves, stooking with the best.

For a little while the poet, under considerable pressure from Tommy, assisted also, but the unaccustomed toil soon became distasteful, and he retired to the shade of a stook for purposes of rest and meditation.

And here, as he sat, he was joined by the same genial shepherd whom they had met on the day they trod the downs to the Roman ruins.

"Deserted the flocks, then?" asked the poet.

The shepherd grinned.

"'Ess, sir. Folded 'em early, do 'ee see, sir, an' come down to make some money at the harvest, sir."

He paused to fill his mouth with bread, taking at the same time a long pull of cold tea.

"Hungry work, sir, it be, this harvest work."

"It must undoubtedly stimulate the appetite, as you say."

"'Ess, sir, that it do. But it 's good work fer the likes o' I, sir, it be, means more money, doan't 'ee see, sir; not as I bees in want o' money, sir, but it 's always welcome, sir. No, sir, I need n't do no work fer a year an' more, sir, an' live like a gen'lman arl the time, too, sir."

"You have saved, then?"

"'Ess, that I have, an' there 's a many as knows it, sir, an' asked I to marry 'em, sir, too, they 'as, but not I, sir. I sticks to what I makes, sir. An' look 'ee 'ere, sir, money 's easy spent along o' they gals, sir, be n't it, onst they gets their 'ands on it?"

The poet looked at him reflectively.

"They ask you then, do they?"

"'Ess, sir, fower or five on 'em, sir. But I wants none on 'em, sir, an' I tells 'em straight, sir."

The poet sighed.

"It must save a lot of trouble to — when the suggestion comes from the fairer side."

The shepherd wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Fower or five on 'em," he observed, meditatively.

"Dear, dear, what a — what a conqueror of hearts you must be!"

The shepherd looked at him a little dubiously.

"Fower or five on 'em," he repeated. "An' one on 'em earnin' eighteen shillin' a week an' forty pound laid by. An' I walked out wi' 'er a bit, I did, sir, but I war n't 'avin' none on 'er when she asked I to marry 'er, an' I told 'er, an' my parents, they was main angry, too, wi' me, they was, sir.

"But there y' are, sir. I did n't want none o' 'er forty pounds, sir, an' you bees got to stick to 'em wen you marries 'em, be n't 'ee, sir?"

The shepherd shook his head.

"No, sir, I don't believe in marryin' no

one as you does n't kind o' like, do 'ee see, sir."

The poet nodded.

"An excellent sentiment," he said.

"Money be n't everythin', sir, bee 't, as I told 'em, sir, all on 'em. Money be n't everythin'."

"But is n't it — is n't it a little embarrassing to be sought in matrimony by four or five ladies?"

The shepherd paused, between two bites, and looked at the poet, in some bewilderment.

"If 'ee means worrittin', sir — it bees a deal more worrittin' to ask 'em, yourself, sir — fower or five on 'em."

He rose and lurched off to join his comrades, and the poet looked after him, with something of envy in his eyes.

"O you fortunate man," he murmured, as he lay back, watching the busy scene, with half-closed eyes.

Presently he half started to his feet, for at the far end of the field he could see Tommy

talking to two newcomers, a tall, slender figure, with a carriage and poise possessed by one alone, and a little girl in a smock frock.

He rose and wandered slowly down the field.

"Four or five," he murmured, "and they asked him — O the lucky, lucky man — they asked him. Dear me, dear me."

"A lovely evening, Miss Gerald."

Mollie looked up, with a smile, from the sheaf she was binding.

"Is n't it jolly — it must be a glad life these open-air folk lead, don't you think?"

"The best of lives — but they don't know it."

Mollie rose, and tossed back a wisp or two of hair from her forehead.

"I am sure I should love it, if it were my lot — the white stems on my arms and the warm sun on my face, and the songs in the wagon, at dusk. Listen to that man singing there — I 'm sure he is just glad of life."

"A strange man," said the poet, follow-

ing her gaze. "A most curious, fortunate person."

"You know him?"

"A little — he is quite a Napoleon of hearts."

Mollie laughed.

"He does n't look even a little bit romantic."

"Oh, he is n't. I fancy the romance, if there is any, must be usually on the other side. He has had four or five offers of marriage."

"What a perfectly horrid idea."

The poet stroked his chin.

"Yet think of the confusion and questioning of heart, and of the hours of agony that it would save a diffident man."

"He does n't look diffident."

"He may not be. I merely make a supposition."

"I think it 's an appalling idea."

"Oh, I know, I know, and yet I can imagine it a bridge to paradise."

"I don't understand."

"Then, suppose a man so stormed by love that by it all life has been renewed and made beautiful for him; and suppose this man so utterly and in every way unsuited to its realisation, that though all there is in him urges him to speak of it, yet he dare not lest he should lose even the cold solace of friendship. Do you not see how it might——?"

Mollie's grey eyes looked him straight in the face.

"No," she said. "It would be better for him never to speak, than to lose his ideal, as he assuredly would."

"You — you would bid him never speak?"

Mollie laughed.

"It depends on so many things — on how and why he was unsuitable, and by whose standard he gauged his shortcoming."

"His own."

"He might be wrong."

"Who could know better?"

"The girl he asked."

"You would bid him ask?"

She was silent; then,

"If — if he were quite sure the girl were worthy," she said, in a low voice.

The poet held out his hands.

"Mollie — my dear, my dear," he said.

"And she 's quite young, too," observed Tommy, as they walked home in the starlight.

The poet waved his hand.

"Love laughs at age — takes no account of it," he said.

"Hurrah," cried Tommy.

XVI

IN WHICH TOMMY CROSSES THE PLOUGHING

THE early days of January were shadowed by Lady Chantrey's illness.

I fancy that over all hung the presentiment that it would bear her away from our midst, and there was no home in Camslove or Becklington, nor a heart in any of the far-scattered farms around them, but would be the sadder for the loss.

And on a January afternoon she kissed Madge for the last time.

To Madge it seemed that heaven and earth alike had become black and desolate, for ever, as she sobbed upon the bedclothes, and besought her mother to come back.

The household was too overwhelmed, and itself too sorrow-stricken to take much notice at first of the child, and for an hour or more she lay with her arms about her mother's neck.

Then, at last, she slipped from the bed and stole out into the dusk. A thin rain was falling over the country-side, but she hardly noticed it as she crossed the barren fields and stumbled through the naked hedges.

At the ploughing she stopped.

Something in the long, relentless furrows seemed to speak to her of the finality of it all, and it was only when she flung herself down upon the upturned earth that, as to all in sorrow, the great mother put forth her words of cheer to her, as who should say:

"See, now, the plough is set, the furrow drawn, and the old life hidden away; and who can make it any more the same? But Spring, little girl, is surely coming, and even, after long months, harvest."

Down the path, across the fields, came Tommy, dangling a contented catapult, and ruminating on the day's successes.

As he passed the ploughing he stopped, and gave a low whistle of surprise — then

guessed quickly enough what had happened. Madge lay stretched out, face downwards, upon the black loam, and for a moment Tommy stood perplexed.

Then he called, in a low voice, almost as he would have spoken in a church:

"Madge, Madge."

But she did not move.

He knelt beside her, and some strange instinct bade him doff his cap. Then he touched her shoulder and her black hair, with shy fingers.

"Madge," he called, again.

The child jumped to her feet, and tossing back her hair, looked at him with half-frightened eyes.

He noticed that her cheeks were stained with the soft earth, and he saw tears upon them.

Tommy had never willingly kissed anyone in his life — he had not known a mother — but now, without thought or hesitation — almost without consciousness, for he was still very much a child — he laid his arms

about her neck and kissed her cheek — once, twice.

But what he said to her only the great night, and the old plough, know.

XVII

IN WHICH TOMMY TAKES THE UPLAND ROAD

If I have not, so far, touched upon Tommy's religious life it is chiefly for the reason that, to me, at this time, it was practically as a sealed book.

Nor had I ever talked with him on these matters. And this for two reasons — one of them being, no doubt, the natural hesitation of the average Englishman to lay his hands upon the veil of his neighbour's sanctuary, and one, a dawning doubt in my mind as to the capacity of my own creed to meet the requirements of Tommy's nature. For, to me, at this time, the idea of God was of One in some distant Olympus watching His long-formulated laws work out their appointed end — a Being infinitely beneficent, and revealed in all nature and beauty, but, spiritually, entirely remote.

And my religion had been that of a reverent habit and a peaceable moderation, and to live contented with my fellows.

But here was a boy put into my hands, with a future to be brought about, and already at the outset I had seen a glimpse of the dangers besetting his path, and the glimpse had, as I have already confessed, frightened me not a little. Nor had my musings so far comforted me, but rather shewn me the lamentable weakness of my position. True, I could lay down rules, and advise and warn, but the whole of Tommy's every word and action showed me the powerlessness of such procedure.

And I dared not let things drift. The matter I felt sure should be approached on religious grounds, and it was this conviction that revealed to me my absolute impotence.

So far as I remembered, no great temptations had assailed me, no violent passions had held me in thrall.

My life had been a smooth one, and of moral struggle and defeat I seemed to know nothing. But that such would be Tommy's lot I felt doubtful, and the doubt (it was

almost a certainty) filled me with many apprehensions.

So full was I of my musings that I had not noticed how in my walk I had reached the doctor's garden.

The click of a cricket bat struck into my thoughts and brought me into the warm afternoon again, with all its sweetness of scent and sound.

I could hear Tommy laughing, and as I drew back the bushes, I caught a glimpse of the doctor coaching him in the right manipulation of the bat.

"I say, I never knew you played cricket, you know," said Tommy. "I thought you were an awful ass at games, and all that sort of thing."

The doctor laughed.

"I 'm jolly rusty at 'em, anyway," he said. "But I used to play a bit in the old days."

Tommy continued to bat, and I lounged, unnoticed, upon the rails, watching the practice.

Presently the doctor took a turn, and I,

too, was surprised at his evident mastery of the art, for I had long since disregarded him as a sportsman.

Tommy's lobs were easy enough, and once the doctor drove a hot return straight at his legs.

Tommy jumped out of the way, but the doctor called to him sharply:

"Field up," he said, and Tommy coloured.

Another return came straight and hard, but Tommy stooped and held it, and the doctor dropped his bat.

"Good," I heard him say. "Stand up to 'em like a man — hurts a bit at the time — but it saves heaps of trouble in the end, and — and the other fellow does n't score."

They were looking straight into each other's eyes, as man to man, and after a pause the doctor spoke again, in a low voice. I could not hear what he said, but Tommy's face was grave as he listened.

I sauntered on down the lane, and a few minutes later felt a hand on my arm.

"Well, and what did you think of it?"

"Of what?"

"The boy's batting. I saw you watching."

"I am not an expert, but he'll do, won't he?"

"Yes — he'll do."

"I did n't know that you had kept up your cricket."

"I have n't. But I mean to revive it if I can. We — we must beat Borcombe next time, you know."

We walked on in silence for a little, then,

"Tommy's main desire appears to be a cricketer just now," observed the doctor.

"As it was to be a poacher, yesterday."

"Or a steam-roller driver, in the years gone by."

"And what, I wonder, to-morrow?"

The doctor was looking thoughtfully over the wide fields, red with sunset.

"To-morrow? Ah, who knows?" He pointed to a pile of cumulus clouds, marching magnificently in the southern sky, bright as Heaven, and changeable as circumstance.

"A boy's dreams," he said. "A little while here and a little while there, always changing but always tinged with a certain fleeting magnificence."

"And never realised?"

"Oh, I don't know. I don't know. We most of us march and march to our cloud mountain-tops, and, maybe, some of us at the day's end find a little low-browed hill somewhere where our everlasting Alps had seemed to stand."

"Surely you are a pessimist."

"Not at all. If we had not marched for the clouds, maybe we should never have achieved the little hill."

"You would have Tommy march, then, for the clouds?"

The doctor laughed.

"He is an average boy. He will do that anyway. But I would have the true light on the clouds, to which he lifts his eyes."

"Ah — if his face were set upon them now," I said half to myself.

On the road to the downs was a small figure.

"See," said my companion, "He is on the upland road. Let us take it as an omen."

And we turned homeward.

Late into the night we talked, and I unfolded my fears for Tommy with a fulness that was foreign to me.

And our talk drifted, as such conversation will, into many and intimate matters, such as men rarely discuss between each other.

And in the end, as I rose to depart, the doctor held my hand.

"See, old friend," he said, "we are nearer to-night than ever for all our seeming fundamental differences, and you will not mind what I have to say.

"To you the idea of God is so great, so infinitely high, that the notion of personal friendship with such an One would seem to be an almost criminal impertinence, and the idea of His interference in our trivial humdrum lives a gross profanity.

"To me, a plain man, and not greatly read, this personal God, this Friend Christ, is more than all else has to offer me.

"It is life's motive, and weapon, and solace, and joy. It is its light and colour and its very *raison d'etre*. And I believe that for the great majority of men this idea of the Divine, and this only, is powerful enough to assure them real victory and moral strength.

"I grant you all the beauty, and majesty, and truth, of your ideal, but I would no more dare to lay it before an average healthy, passionate man alone than I would to send an army into battle — with a position to take — unarmed and leaderless."

The doctor paused. Then:

"Forgive me," he said, "I don't often talk like this, but, believe me, it is the knowledge of his God, as a strong, sympathetic, personal friend, that Tommy needs — that most of us need — to ensure life's truest success."

We shook hands again and parted.

"I am glad you have spoken," said I, "and thank you for your words."

"A tramp — merely a tramp," said the stranger, puffing contentedly at his pipe, on the winding road that led over the dim downs.

Tommy looked at him doubtfully.

He was very tall and broad, and clean, and his Norfolk suit was well made and of stout tweed.

"You don't look much like one," he said.

The stranger laughed.

"For the matter of that no more do you," he observed.

"I 'm not one," said Tommy.

The stranger smoked in silence for a little, and Tommy sat down beside him on the grass.

"I 'm not one," he repeated.

"Shakespeare says we are all players in a great drama, of which the world is the stage, you know. I don't quite know if that 's altogether true, but I 'm pretty sure

that we 're all of us tramps, going it with more or less zest, it is true, and in different costumes — but tramps at the last, every one of us."

Tommy looked at him with puzzled eyes.

"What a rum way of talking you have — something like the poet, only different somehow."

"The poet?"

"Down there at Camslove."

"Ah, I remember. I read some of his things; pretty little rhymes, too, if I remember rightly."

"They 're jolly good," said Tommy, warmly.

"A friend of yours, eh?"

Tommy nodded.

"He wrote one just here, where we 're sitting."

"Did he, by Jove — which was it?"

Tommy pondered.

"I forget most of it, but it was jolly good. He told it me one day on the downs, just as we met a shepherd singing, and it was about

life and enterprise, and all that sort of thing, and love on the upland road and — and God beyond the crest."

"Sounds good, and partly true."

"How do you mean; why is n't it altogether true?"

The stranger smoked a minute or two in silence, then:

"Where is the crest?" he asked.

Tommy pointed up into the twilight.

"It 's a long way to the crest," he said.

"Ah — and the fellows who never get there?"

"I don't understand."

"If God be only beyond the crest, how shall they fare?"

Tommy was silent, looking away down the dusky valley.

He saw a light or two glimmering among the trees.

"It 's time I went back," he muttered, but sat where he was.

"You see what I mean?" continued the stranger. "There is only one crest worth

striving for, and that is always beyond our reach, and God is beyond it and above it, all right. But there 's many a poor fellow who would have his back to it now if he were not sure that God was also on the upland road, among the tramps."

Tommy was silent, plucking uncomfortably at the grass.

"You have n't thought much about these things?"

"No."

"Ah, but you must, though. You see, until a fellow knows the road he is on, he cannot achieve, nor even begin to surmount."

"How did you kno 'he road you 're on, then?"

"I had a friend."

"And he knew?"

"Yes, been over it all before, knew every turn, and all the steep places. He has come with me. He is with me now."

Tommy peered up the darkening road.

"I can't see him," he said.

"Ah, but you will. I 'm sure you will."

"What is his name?"

The stranger rose to his feet, and held out his hand,

"Christ," he said, as Tommy looked into his eyes. Then,

"Good-bye, old chap — meet again somewhere, perhaps — and, I say, about the road, shall it be the upland road for both of us?"

Tommy was silent, then, as they shook hands,

"Yes," he said.

"Hullo, Tommy," said I, on my return that night, from the doctor's study, "Enjoyed the evening?"

"Had some awful good practice with the doctor's bat."

"We saw you on the downs afterwards."

Tommy looked at me, with bright eyes, as if about to tell me something, but he changed his mind.

"Yes," he said, "I met a stranger there."

XVIII

AND LAST

And so these brief sketches plucked here and there from the boyhood of Tommy Wideawake, and patched unskilfully together, must be gathered up and docketed as closed, even as the boyhood from which they have been drawn.

Yet the story of Tommy Wideawake is still being written, where all may read who have eyes for the strength and godliness of a country squire's life, and a hand for his stalwart grip.

On the occasion of Tommy's twenty-first birthday, there were, of course, great rejoicings in Camslove, and a general gathering of the country-side to the old Grange.

Tommy, in the course of a successful, if not eloquent speech, made some extravagant remarks as to the debt he owed to his four friends, and guardians — the poet, the vicar, the doctor, and myself.

Modesty forbids their repetition, and

doubtless youthful enthusiasm accounted for their absurdity.

One other he mentioned in his speech — a stranger whom, long ago, he had met on the upland road.

Thus Tommy in his maiden speech.

Three years later he brought a bride to Camslove, and her name was Madge, and the rest of us live on in much the old way, excepting of course the poet, who, as a married man, affects a fine pity for us less fortunate ones.

And yet we are not altogether the same men, I fancy, as in those days.

The vicar's house has become a perfect playground for the poet's children, and my own is occasionally sadly mauled by certain sacrilegious nephews, much to the annoyance of my man.

The doctor is president, and indeed the shining light of the village cricket team, and we, at Camslove, flatter ourselves that we can put up a very decent game.

So I lay aside my pen awhile and read

what I have written, and as I read I am glad that I am led from garden to valley, and stream, and mill, and over the common, and up the windy down.

For if a boy's will be indeed the wind's will, let it be that of the wind on the heath, which the gipsies breathe. And if the thoughts of a boy be long, long thoughts, let them be born of earth, and air, and sun.

And his sins, since sin and sunlight are incompatible, must needs be easy of correction.

And his faith, when of a sudden he shall find that there is God in all these things, shall be so deep that not all the criticism of all the schools shall be able to root it out of his heart.

And the moral, if you must needs hammer one out, would be this, that soundness is more to be desired than scholarship, and that the heart of boyhood is, by nature, nearer to God than that of later life.

But let him who would draw the veil aside, do so with tender hands.

TO THE EDITOR OF "THE OUTLOOK" FOR PERMISSION TO REPRINT SUNDRY VERSES THE AUTHOR'S THANKS ARE DUE : : : : : : : : : : : : : : :

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